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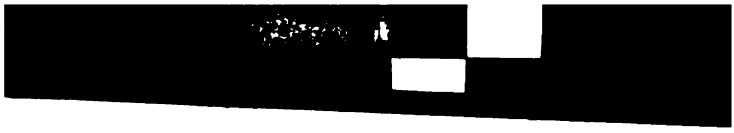
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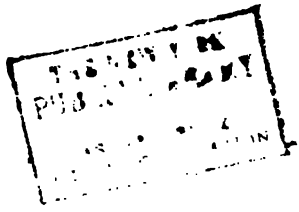




THE HAPPY WARRIOR









HAPPY
RRIOR

L[illegible]CHENSON

BOSTON
BROWN, AND COMPANY
1913



THE HAPPY WARRIOR

BY

A. S. M. HUTCHINSON

AUTHOR OF "ONCE ABOARD THE LUGGER ——"

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY

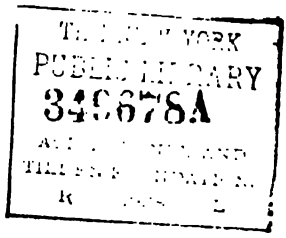
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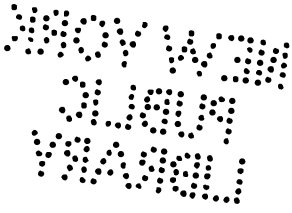




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WHO is the happy Warrior? Who is he
That every man in arms should wish to be?
— It is the generous spirit, who, . . .
Come when it will, is equal to the need . . .
Who, with a toward or untoward lot,
Prosperous or adverse, to his wish or not —
Plays, in the many games of life, that one
Where what he most doth value must be won:
Whom neither shape of danger can dismay,
Nor thought of tender happiness betray.

— WORDSWORTH.



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BOOK ONE

A NICE, SHORT BOOK, ILLUSTRATING THE ELEMENTS OF CHANCE



THE HAPPY WARRIOR

BOOK ONE

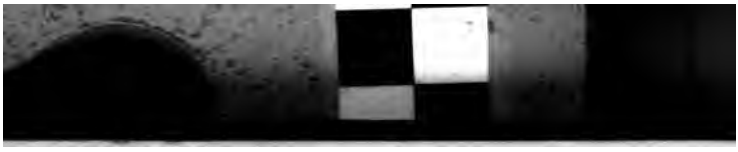
A NICE, SHORT BOOK, ILLUSTRATING THE ELEMENTS OF CHANCE

CHAPTER I

A PAGE OF THE PEERAGE

I

THIS life we stumble through, or strut through, or through which we creep and whine, or through which we dance and whistle, is built upon hazard — and that is why it is such a very wobbling affair, made up of tricks and chances; hence its miseries, but hence also its spice; hence its tragedies, and hence also its romance. A dog I know — illustrating the point — passed from its gate into the village street one morning, and merely to ease the itch of a momentary fit of temper, or merely to indulge a prankish whim, put a firm bite into a plump leg. Mark, now, the hazard foundation of this chancey life. A dozen commonplace legs were offered the dog; it might have tasted the lot and procured no more pother than the passing of a few shillings, the solatium of a pair of trousers or so. One leg was as good as another to the dog; yet it chanced upon the vicar's (whose back was turned), enjoyed its bite, jerked from the devout but startled man an amazingly coarse expres-



sion, and hence arose alarums and excursions, a vill set by the ears, family feuds, a budding betrothal crusl by parental strife (one party owning the dog and other calling the vicar Father) and the genesis of a d set against the vicar's curate (who hit at the dog a struck the priest) that ended in the unfortunate yo man having to leave the village.

But all that is by the way, and is only offered to y notice because commonplace examples are usually most striking illustrations. It is introduced to exc the starting of this story with its least and worst ch acter. He figures but occasionally on these pag yet by this chance and by that he comes to play a v part as the story draws to an end; he comes, in fa to close it: and therefore, out of his place, he shall the first to occupy your attention.

Egbert Hunt his name.

II

Miller's Field, Hertfordshire, an outer suburb London and within the cockney twang, was put int proper commotion by the news that had brought title into its midst — had left a peerage as casually the morning milk at its desirable residence "Hillsid where Mr. and Mrs. Letham (Lord and Lady Bur as suddenly and completely as Monday becomes Tu day) made their home. The commotion chattered a clacked in every household and in every chance m ing in the streets; but it swirled most violently ab Hillside and in Hillside, and its brunt — if his c statement may be accepted — pressed most hea upon Egbert Hunt.

Egbert, morose, a pallid and stoutish boy of fourt

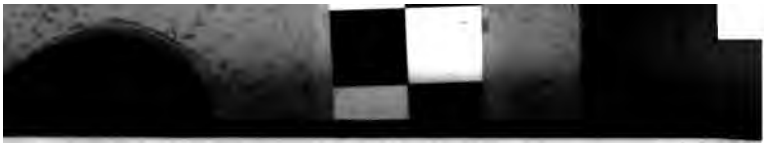
years, constituted the male staff at Hillside. This boy toiled sullenly at a diversity of tasks, knives, boots, coals, windows: any soul-corroding duties of such character, throughout the earlier hours of the day. In the afternoon he fitted himself into a tight page-boy's suit that had been procured through the advertisement columns of the "Lady," and that, on the very day of its arrival, had been shorn of much of the glory it first possessed in Egbert's eyes.

Sunning himself proudly down the village street, the lad had been greeted with a howl of "Marbles!" by the ribald companions he thought to impress.

"Marbles! They're buttons, yer silly toads!" the indignant Egbert had cried.

"Wot O! Marbles!" they jeered, and two of the round silver buttons were wrenched off in the distressing affair that followed.

Egbert carried them home in his pocket. The incident augmented the hostile and suspicious air with which, from his childhood upwards, he regarded the world. For this attitude the accident attending his birth was primarily responsible. When he presented this morose disposition to his mother's friends, Mrs. Hunt, in her softer moods, would instruct them that his sourness — as she termed it — was due to the sudden and unexpected discharge of a cannon during her visit to a circus, when Egbert was but eight months on the road to this vale of tears. The cannon had hastened his arrival (she never knew, so she said, how she managed to get home) and the abruptness, she was convinced, was responsible for his glum demeanor. By a dark process of reasoning, wherein were combined retribution to the clown who had fired the cannon and recompense to the child it had unduly impelled into the world,



she had named the boy Egbert, this being the title by which the clown was announced on the circus programme.

The story became a popular joke against the lad; to shout "Bang!" at Egbert from behind concealment became a favourite sport of his grosser companions. It rankled him sorely. For one so young he was unnaturally embittered; his digestion, moreover, was defective.

III

Upon the evening of the day on which his employers, Mr. and Mrs. Letham, had been miraculously elevated to the style and title of Lord and Lady Burdon, Egbert's hostility towards the world was at its height. From half-past three onwards, callers followed one another, or passed one another, over the Hillside threshold. Egbert was bone-tired. It was close upon seven when kindly Mrs. Archer, the doctor's wife, addressing him as he showed her out, inquired in her gentle way after his mother and passed down the path with a "Well, good night, Egbert!"

"Good night, mum," Egbert muttered. He added in a lower but more devout key, "An' I yope ter Gawd yer the last of um."

The cool air invited him to the gate and he leaned wearily over it, his bitterness of spirit increased by a boy who, spying him, cried, "Bang!" as he passed, "Bang!" in retort to Egbert's tongue thrust out in hatred and contempt across the gate, and "Bang! bang!" again, as the gathering evening took him in her trailing cloak.

Egbert drew in his tongue with a groan of misery and

hate, of indigestion and of weariness. An approaching footstep along the road caused him to thrust it out again and to keep it extended, armed lest the newcomer should be one of the bangers who irked his young life.

It chanced to be his father, returning from work in the fields. Mr. Hunt paused opposite his son and gazed for a few moments at the outstretched tongue. At some pain to himself Egbert pressed it to further extension: the boy was a little short-sighted and in the gloom did not recognise his parent.

"Tongue sore?" Mr. Hunt inquired, after a space.

Recognising the voice, Egbert restored the member to his mouth.

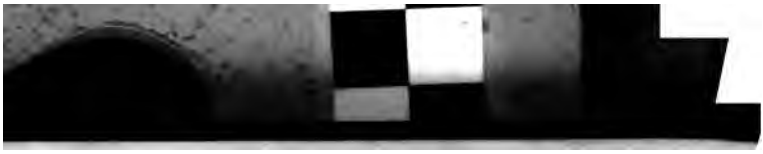
"Comes of tellin' a lie, so I've 'eard," said Mr. Hunt.

Considerable sympathy was in his tone; but Egbert gave no more attention to this view of retributive justice than he had vouchsafed to the question preceding it.

Father and son — neither greatly given to words when together — continued to regard each other solemnly across the gate. Presently Egbert jerked his head back at the house. "Heard about it?" he inquired.

The news had long since permeated the village. Mr. Hunt said, "Ah!" and taking a step forward, gazed earnestly at the house, first on one side of Egbert's head and then on the other. His air was that of a man who, the inmates suddenly having reached the peerage, rather expected to see a coronet suspended from the roof or a scarlet robe fluttering from a window; and as he stepped back he said, "Ah!" again, in a tone that committed him, as a result of his observations, neither to complete surprise nor complete satisfaction.

"Ah!" said Mr. Hunt, and shifted the spade he carried from his left hand to his right and waited.



"Goin' to take me with 'em when they move to the 'Ouse o' Lords," Egbert announced. "Told me so, dinner time."

Mr. Hunt put the spade before him, and leaning on it gazed profoundly at his son. "Ah! You'll wear one of them wing things side of yer 'at, that's what you'll wear," he informed him. "Tall 'at."

"Cockatoos they call um, don't they?" Egbert inquired.

"That's right. Side of yer 'at," his father replied. "Tall 'at."

Egbert appeared to ponder gloomily on the prospect. It was the habit of this boy's sombre mind to suspect a hidden indignity in each change thrust into his life. Seeking it in the cockatoos, he presently found it.

"Make me a Guy-forx again, I suppose," he said. "Same as these 'ere buttons."

Mr. Hunt took a step forward, and peering over the gate gazed down at his son's buttons with considerable concern.

The inspection finished, "Different in the 'Ouse o' Lords," he consoled. "Expec' they'll all wear them wing things side of their 'ats there. Call 'em same as they call you, that's what you can do. Tall 'ats."

But this boy's pessimism was incurable. "I'll have the biggest, you'll find," Egbert responded. "Else they'll give me two an' make a Guy-forx of me that way."

Mr. Hunt mentally visualised cockades the size of albatross wings on each side of his son's hat. The picture made him unable to deny the slightly outré effect that would be produced, and he began to move away.

"Comin' in to see your mother to-night, I suppose?" he asked.

Egbert grunted.

"Tongue still sore?"

"Boilin'," said Egbert, and turning from the gate moved moodily towards the house.

At nine o'clock, following his usual Tuesday night privilege, he betook himself down the village street to his parents' cottage. A further word or two dropped by his mistress joined with kitchen gossip during supper to enable him to supply something of the information for which he found his mother impatiently waiting.

"So you're goin' with 'em, I hear?" she greeted him.

Egbert nodded.

"Think you was goin' to prising, 'stead of to a lord's castle, one would, judgin' by your face," Mrs. Hunt exclaimed.

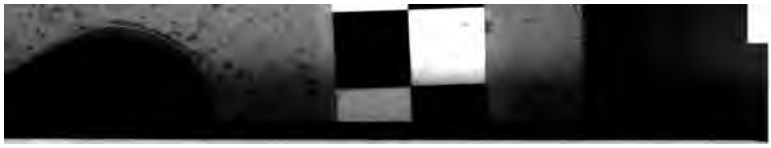
"Goin' to wear one o' them wing things side of his 'at, that's what he's goin' to wear," announced her husband. "Tall 'at."

"An' oughter be proud," cried Mrs. Hunt. "Hold yer yed up, Sulky, do!"

Sulky gave a stiff jerk to his bullet head. "Not goin' to the 'Ouse o' Lords, after all," he answered his father.

"'Ouse o' Lords! 'Ouse o' nonsense!" Mrs. Hunt exclaimed. "Goin' to live in a castle, that's where you're goin' to live, young man. Down in Wiltsheer; the cook told me all about it when I popped round this afternoon."

"Goin' to wear one o' them wing things side of 'is 'at, that's what he's goin' to wear," pronounced Mr. Hunt doggedly. "Tall 'at. Tall 'at," he reaffirmed; but "In a castle!" Mrs. Hunt continued, heedless of the interruption. "Burdon Old Manor, they call it, at a place called Little Letham, which Letham is the



family name of the family, they giving their name to it as is very often the case, and a proper castle it is, too, though called a Manor."

Mrs. Hunt foamed out this information with a heat that increased as she perceived the morose indifference with which Egbert accepted it. Throwing herself into the third person, "Don't you 'ear what your mother is a telling of you, Sulk?" she demanded. Her eye caught on the wall behind Sulk's head a coloured presentation calendar depicting Lambert Simnel at scullion's work in an enormous kitchen, and she took inspiration. "A proper castle, your mother's telling you, where you'll have scullings in the kitchen; that's what you'll 'ave, you nasty sulk, you! Can't you say something?"

"I'll sculling 'em!" breathed Egbert, yielding to her request. He scented in this new form of acquaintance some fresh trial and indignity. "I'll sculling 'em!" he repeated.

His fierce intention earned him at once, and earned him full, the thump upon his head that his mother's excitement and his own gloom had been conspiring to inflict ever since he entered the cottage; and he trudged his way back to Hillside viciously embittered against every point of an aching day: his mistress, her visitors, the approaching change in his life, his mother, the "scullings." "Tyrangs!" said Egbert. He stumbled over a stone as he pronounced the savage word and bit his tongue most painfully. "Boil yer," said Egbert to the stone; and, including the stone with the "tyrangs," as wearily he got him to bed, "Boil um!" he said. "Tyrangs! Toads!"

CHAPTER II

A CHANGE IN THE PEERAGE

THIS hazard foundation of life! As a stone tossed down a hillside dislodges others and sets them rolling, themselves dislodging more till the first light pitch will gather to a rumble where was peace, the first stone cause to jump and shout many score that might have held their place long after the thrower's idle hand was equal dust with the dust of their descent — so it is with the lightest action that the least of us may idly toss upon our small affairs. We cannot move alone. Life has us in a web, within whose meshes none may stir a hand but he pulls here, loosens there, and sets a wave of movement through a hundred tangles of the coil.

This hazard foundation of life! Egbert Hunt was made to lean wearily over the gate that evening and the toads and "tyrangs" whose oppression had cost him a bitter day were set in his path by a movement in the web, leagues upon leagues of land and sea from Miller's Field. Life has us in a web. In one remote corner an Afridi tribesman shot a British officer: that was his movement in the meshes, and swift, swift, the chain of tugs set up thereby acted upon a morose page-boy in another remote corner, rendering him bone-tired through ushering the visitors come to congratulate those who had stepped into the dead man's shoes.



This hazard touch even in the billet that the Afridi tribesman selected for his bullet! In sheeting rain, behind a rock above a pass on the northwestern frontier of India, Multan Khan — Afridi, one-time sepoy, deserter from his regiment, scoundrel, first-class shot — snuggled his cheek against his stolen rifle, hesitated for a moment between the heads of three British officers, drew a line on one, pressed the trigger; and, while he chuckled over his success, himself pitched dead with a bullet through the incautious skull he had craned over the rock the better to enjoy the fruits of his skill.

Brief his pleasure but lusty the tug he had given the web. The news of it reached London just in time to catch the final edition of the evening papers as they went to press, just in time to supply a good contents-bill for an uncommonly dull night.

PEER
KILLED IN
FRONTIER
FIGHTING

went flaming down the streets, substantiated in the news columns by a brief message announcing Lord Burdon's name among the casualties of a brisk little engagement in the Frontier Campaign.

The morning papers did better with it, particularly that which Egbert Hunt took in from the doorstep of Hillside. This paper's "Own Correspondent" with the British force, eluding vigilance, had enjoyed the fortune of getting among the party detailed for clearing the rocks whence Multan Khan and his friends had made themselves surprisingly unpleasant; and his long de-

spatch, well handled in Fleet Street, bravely headlined above:

Gallant Young Peer
Lord Burdon Killed in Sharp Frontier Engagement
Leads Dashing Charge

and nicely rounded off below with a paragraph written up from "cuttings about Lord Burdon" in the newspaper's library, was distributed far and wide on the morrow. The journalists dished it up, the presses hammered it out, the carts, the trains, and the boys galloped it broadcast over the country. To some it fetched tragedy (as we shall see); to others idle interest; to Egbert Hunt a bone-aching day and cruel indignities (as have been shown); to Mrs. Letham bewildering excitement.



CHAPTER III

INTO THE PEERAGE

I

It made Mrs. Letham very excited. Mrs. Letham, coming upon it as she idly turned over the newspaper at her breakfast, took a bang at the heart that for the moment made the print difficult to read. Recovering, she read it through, her pulses drumming, her breath catching, her hands shaking so that the paper rustled a little between them. She half rose from her seat, then read again. She read a third time and now pursued the lines to that subjoined paragraph written up from the "cuttings about Lord Burdon."

"Lord Burdon, the twelfth Baron, was attached to the staff of General Sir Wryford Sheringham, commanding the expeditionary force. He was a lieutenant in the 30th Hussars and left England in October last with General Sheringham when the latter went out to take command. Lord Burdon, who only attained his majority in April last, was unmarried. This is the first time since the creation of the Barony in 1660 that the title has not passed directly from holder to eldest son; and about Little Letham, Wilts, where is Burdon Old Manor, the family seat, the expressions "Safe as a Burdon till he's got his heir," and "Safe as a Burdon heir" have passed into the common parlance of the countryside.

The successor is of a very remote branch — Mr. Maurice Redpath Letham, whose paternal great-grandfather was the eighth baron. It will be noticed as a most singular event that the first break in a direct succession extending over two hundred years should cause the new heir to be found in the line of no fewer than four generations ago of his house."

When Mrs. Letham presently arose, she arose suddenly as if she forced herself to move against spells that numbed her movements. She arose, the paper clutched between her hands, and for a space she stood with a dizzy air, as if her thoughts reeled in a giddy maze and perplexed her actions. A jostle of visions — half caught, bewildering glimpses of what this thing meant to her — spun through her brain, the mind shaping them quicker than the mental eye could distinguish them, as one half-stunned by a blow, dizzy between its violence and the onward pressure of events. She put a hand for support upon the table before her and felt, but did not think to end, the unpleasant shrinking of her flesh communicated by her fingers scraping the wood where they bunched the cloth beneath them.

She was Lady Burdon . . . !

II

With that amazement singing in her ears, and recovered from the first effects of her bewilderment, she went quickly to the door and excitedly up the stairs. She was thirty-five; they called her pretty; and certainly she made an attractive presence as she came to the threshold of the room where she sought her husband. Her entry was abrupt: a quick jerk on the door handle, the door wide open and she with a sudden movement

standing there, tense, animated, a flush on her cheeks, sparkle in her eyes, and a high, glad, strange note in the "Maurice!" that she cried. "Maurice!"

"Con-found!" came the answer. "Conster-*nation!*" and illustrating the reason of the words, a fleck of blood came through the snowy lather on a chin in process of being shaved.

Mr. Letham — portly; forty; pleasant of countenance in a loose-lipped, good-natured fashion; in a shirt and trousers before the looking-glass; pain on face; finger firmly on the blood stain; razor in the other hand — Mr. Letham peered short-sightedly into the mirror, made a very squeamish stroke with the razor in the vicinity of the wound, and, quickly over his concern, pleasantly addressed his wife.

"'Morning, old girl. I say, you made me jump. Am I so fearfully late? What's for breakfast?"

He did not turn to face her. Viewed from behind, half-hitched trousers and bulging shirt, he had a lumpish appearance, and it was the more inelegant for the contortions of his arms and shoulders, characteristic of a clumsy shaver.

The spectacle caused Mrs. Letham a pucker of the brows that marred her rosy animation. She said, "Maurice! Do turn round! I've something to tell you."

"M-m-m," murmured Mr. Letham, at very ticklish work with the razor.

"Maurice!"

"M-m-m — M-m-m. Beastly rude, I know. Half-a-second, old girl. This is a most infernal job —"

She interrupted him, "Oh, listen! Listen! In this paper here —" Her voice caught. "In this paper — you are Lord Burdon!"

Mr. Letham, signalling amusement as best he was able, gave a kind of wriggle of his back, held his breath while he made another stroke with the razor, and expired the breath with: "Well, I'll buy a new razor then, hanged if I won't. This infernal thing —" and he bent towards the glass, peering at the reflection of the skin he had cleared.

The door behind him slammed violently, and then for the first time he turned. He had thought her gone — angry, as she was often angry, at his mild joking. Instead he saw her standing there, one hand behind her in the action with which she had swung-to the door, the other clutching the newspaper all rumpled up against her bosom; and there was that in her face, in her eyes, and in the tremble of her parted lips that made him change the easy, tolerant smile and the light banter with which he turned to her. "Only my silly fun, Nelly," he began. "What is it? Some howler in the newspaper? Let's have a —" Then appreciated the pose, the eyes, the parted lips; and changed nervously to: "Eh? Eh? What is it? What's up?"

She broke out: "Your fun! Will you only listen! It's true — true what I tell you! You are Lord Burdon." Angry and incoherent she became, for her husband blinked at her, and looked untidy and looked doltish. "He's unmarried. I was trying only the other day to interest you in what that meant. When his uncle died last August I spoke to you about it —"

Mr. Letham, blinking, more untidy, more doltish: "Who's unmarried?"

And she cried at him: "Young Lord Burdon! Young Lord Burdon is dead! He's been killed in the fighting in India —"

She stopped. She had moved him at last.

III

Mr. Letham laid down his razor — slowly, letting the handle slip noiselessly from his fingers to the dressing-table. Slowly also he lifted his face towards his wife, and she saw his mild forehead all puckered, his eyes dimmed with a bemused air, his loose mouth parted: she particularly saw the comical aspect given to his perturbation by its setting of little patches of soap with the little trickle of red at the chin.

He put out a hand for the paper and made a slow step towards her. "Eh?" he said — a kind of bleat, it sounded to her.

"No! Listen!" she told him. "Listen to this at the end of the account," and she spread the sheet in her hands. A little difficult to find the place . . . a little difficult to control her voice. . . . "Listen!" and she found and read aloud, in jerky sentences, the paragraph that had been made out of "cuttings about Lord Burdon."

Almost in a whisper the vital clause ". . . *the successor is of a very remote branch — Mr. Maurice Redpath Letham, whose paternal great-grandfather was the eighth baron.* . . ."

And in a whisper, dizzy again with the amazement of it: "Maurice! Do you realise?"

His turn for bewilderment. He ignored her appeal. He did not heed her agitation. He took the paper from her and she read that in his eyes — preoccupation with some idea outside her range — that caused her own to harden. She crossed and stood against the bed rail, and she eyed him with narrowing gaze as he read Our Own Correspondent's despatch.

"Poor young beggar!" he murmured, following the story. "Poor, plucky young beggar!"

She just watched his face, comical with its dabs of drying soap, reddening a little, eyelids blinking. She watched him reach the fold of the paper, ignore the paragraph relating to himself, and turn again to Our Own Correspondent's account. "Poor — poor, plucky young beggar!" he repeated.

She gave a little catch at her breath. He exasperated her — exasperated! Here was the most amazing fortune suddenly theirs, and he was blind to it! Often Mrs. Letham flamed against her husband those outbursts of almost ungovernable exasperation that a dull intelligence, fumbling with an idea, arouses in the quick-witted. They are the more violent, these outbursts, if the stupid fumbling, fumbling with some moral issue, conveys a reproach to the quicker wit. She was made to feel such a reproach by that reiterated "Poor young beggar! Poor, plucky young beggar!" It intensified the outbreak of exasperation that threatened her; and she told herself the reproach was unmerited, and that intensified her anger more. It was nothing to her and less than nothing, this boy's death; but she had rushed up to her husband the better to enjoy her natural joy by sharing it with him, and ready, if he had met her excitement, to compassionate the fate of young Lord Burdon. He greeted her, instead, only with "Poor young beggar! Poor, plucky young beggar!" She caught her breath. Exasperation surged like a live thing within her. If he said it again! If he said it again, she would break out! She could not bear it! She would dash the paper from his hands. She would cry in his startled face — his doltish face: "What! What! What! What! Don't you see? Don't you understand? Lord Burdon! Lady Burdon! Are you a fool? Are you an utter, utter fool?"



IV

He opened his lips and she trembled. It is natural to judge her harshly, natural to misjudge her, to consider her incredibly snobbish, cruel, common. She was none of these. Given time, given warning, she would have received her great news, received her husband's reception of it, gently and kindly. But life pays us no consideration of that kind. Events come upon us not as the night merges from the day, but as highway robbers clutch at and grapple with us before we can free our weapons.

Happily, for the first time since he had taken the paper, Mr. Letham seemed to remember her. He glanced up, flushed, damp in the eyes, stupidly droll with the dabs of drying soap: "I say, Nellie, did you read this:

"*The boy — he was absolutely no more than a boy — poked this way and that on the little ridge we had gained, trying, whimpering just like a keen terrier at a thick hedge, to find a way up through the rocks and thorns above us. We were a dozen yards behind him, blowing and cursing. 'Damn it! we've taken a bad miss in balk on this line!' he cried, turning round at us, laughing. Next moment he had struck an opening and was scrambling, on hands and knees. 'This way, Sergeant-major!' he shouted. . . .*"

Portly Mr. Letham, carried away by the grip of the thing, drew himself up and squared his shoulders. He repeated "'This way, Sergeant-major!'" and stuck, and stopped, and swallowed, and turned shining eyes on his wife (she stood there brooding at him) and exclaimed: "Can't you imagine it, Nellie? Listen: '*This way, Sergeant-major!' he shouted, jumped on his feet, gave a hand to his sergeant; cried 'Come on! Come on! Whoop! Forward! Forward!' and then staggered, twisted a bit on*

his toes, dropped. I saw another officer-boy jump up to him with 'Burdon! Burdon, old buck, have you got it?' . . ."

Portly Mr. Letham's voice cracked off into a high squeak, and he lowered the paper and said huskily: "I say, Nellie, eh? I say, Nellie, though? That's the stuff, eh? Poor boy! Brave boy!"

With unseeing eyes he blinked a moment at his wife's face. Brooding, she watched him. Then he turned to the washstand and began to remove the signs of shaving from his cheeks, holding the sponge scarcely above the water as he squeezed it out, as though a noise were unseemly in the presence of the scene his thoughts pictured.

And she just stood there, that brooding look upon her face. Ah! again! He was off again!

"And his grandmother," Mr. Letham said, wiping his face in a towel, sniffing a little, paying particular attention to the drying of his eyes. "I say, Nellie, his poor grandmother, eh? How she will be suffering! Think of her picking up her paper and reading that! . . . Only saw him once," he mumbled on, brushing his thin hair. "Took him across town when he was going home for his first holidays from Eton. Remember it like yesterday. I remember — "

It was the end of her endurance; she could stand no more of it. "Oh, Maurice!" she broke out; "oh, Maurice, for goodness' sake!"

Mr. Letham turned to her in a puzzled way. He held a hair brush in either hand at the level of his ears and stared at her from between them: "Why, Nellie —" he began; "what — what's up, old girl?"

She struck her hands sharply together. "Oh, you go on, you go on, you go on!" she cried. "You make me — don't you understand? Can't you understand? I

thought that when I brought you this news you'd be as excited as I was. Instead — instead —" She broke off and changed her tone. "Oh, do go on brushing your hair. For goodness' sake don't stand staring at me like that!"

He obeyed in his slowish way. "Well, upon my soul, I don't quite understand, old girl," he said perplexedly.

"That's what I'm telling you," she cried sharply and suddenly. "You don't. You go on, you go on!"

He seemed to be puzzling over that. His silence made her break out with the hard words of her meaning. "Do you really not understand?" she broke out. "Do you go on like that just to irritate me? I believe you do." She gave her vexed laugh again. "I don't know what to believe. It's ridiculous — ridiculous you should be so different from everybody else. It means to me, this news, just this: that it makes you Lord Burdon. Can't you realise? Can't you share my feelings?"

"Oh!" he said, as if at last he understood, and said no more.

"How can I work up sympathy for people I have never seen?" she asked.

He did not answer her — brushed his hair very slowly.

"Nobody can say I should. Anybody in my place would feel as I feel."

Still no reply, and that annoyed her beyond measure, forced her to say more than she meant.

"What are they to me, these Burdons?"

"They're my family, old girl," Mr. Letham ventured.

She did not wish to say it but she said it; he goaded her. "You've never troubled to make them mine," she cried.

Mr. Letham had done with his hair. He struggled a collar around his stout neck, examined what injury his

finger nails had suffered in the process, and set to work on his tie.

V

For a few minutes Mrs. Letham frowned at the solid, untidy back turned towards her — the lumped shoulders, the heavy neck, the bulges of shirt sticking out between the braces. She gave a little laugh then — useless to be vexed. "You've never quarrelled with any one in your life, have you, Maurice?" she said; and with a touch in which kindliness struggled with impatience, she jerked down the bulging shirt, straightened a twisted brace, said, "Let me!" and by a deft twist or two gave Mr. Letham a neater tie than ever he had made himself. "There! That's better! Have you?" she asked.

He told her smiling: "Not with you, anyway, Nellie." Little attentions like these were rare, and he liked them. In his weak and amiable way he patted the hand that rested for a moment on his shoulder, and he explained. "You're quite right, of course, old girl. Of course I realise what it means to you and I ought to have shared it with you at once. I'm sorry — sorry, Nellie. Just like me. And about never making them your family. I know you're right there. But you don't really mean that — don't mean I've done it intentionally. You know — I've often told you — we were miles apart, my branch and theirs; you do see that, don't you, old girl? A different branch — another crowd altogether. I don't suppose you've ever even heard of the relations who stand the same to you as I stand to the Burdons. All the time we've been married, long before that even, I've never had anything to do with 'em." He smiled affectionately at her. "That's all right, isn't it?"



She was getting impatient that he ran on so. "Of course, of course," she said indifferently. "I never meant to say that." And then: "Oh, Maurice, but do — do — do think what I'm feeling." She entwined her fingers about his arms and looked caressingly up at him. "Have you thought what it means to us, Maurice?"

He liked that. He liked the "us" from her lips. His normal disposition returned to him; he smiled whimsically at her. "'Pon my soul, I haven't," he said; and added, smiling more, "it's a big order. By Gad, it's a big order, Nellie."

She clapped her hands in her excitement and stood away from him, her eyes sparkling. "Maurice! Lord Burdon! Fancy!"

"It'll be a nuisance, I shouldn't wonder," he grimaced.

She laughed delightedly. "Oh, that's just like you to think that! A nuisance! Maurice! Think of it! Lady Burdon — me! It's a dream, isn't it?"

"It's a bit of a startler," he agreed, smiling tolerantly down upon her excitement.

She laughed aloud. "But fancy you a lord!" and she looked at him, holding him by both his arms and laughed again. "A startler! A nuisance! What a — what a *person* you are, Maurice! Fancy you a lord! You'll have to — you'll have to *buck up*, Maurice!"

He turned away for a moment, occupying himself in fumbling in a drawer. When he turned again to her, his face had the tail of a grimace that she thought expressive of how repugnant to him was the mere thought of any change in his life. "Well, there's one thing," he said. "It won't be for long;" and he tapped his heart, that doctors had condemned.

She knew that was only his characteristic way of joking, but a flicker of irritation shadowed her face.

She hated reference to what had often been a spoil-sport cry of "Wolf! Wolf!"

"Oh, that's absurd!" she cried. "That's nonsense; you know it is. Those doctors! Make haste and dress and come down. Make haste! Make haste! I want to talk all about it. I want you to tell me — heaps of things: what will happen, how it will happen. Now, do make haste. I'll run down now and see to Baby." She had danced away towards the door; now turned again, a laugh on her face. "Baby! What is he now, Maurice?"

"Still a baby, I expect you'll find, though I have been nearly an hour dressing."

For once she laughed delightedly at his mild absurdity; just now her world answered with a laugh wherever she touched a chord. "His title, I mean. An honourable, isn't it — the son of a peer? The Honourable Rollo Letham! I must tell him!" She laughed again, moved lightly to the door and went humming down the stairs.

Mr. Letham waited till the sound had passed. When the slam of a distant door announced the unlikelihood of her return, he dropped rather heavily into a chair and put his hand against the heart he had playfully tapped. "Confound!" said Mr. Letham, breathing hard. "Con-ster-*nation* and damn the thing. Like a sword, that one. Like a twisting sword!"

For the new Lady Burdon had been wrong in estimating any humour in the grimace with which he had looked at her after turning away, while she told him he must *buck up*.



CHAPTER IV

A FORETASTE OF THE PEERAGE

I

A WORRYING morning foreshadowed — or might have foreshadowed — to Egbert Hunt the strain and distress of the afternoon whose effect upon him we have seen. Normally his master was closeted in the study with the three young men who read with him for University examinations; his mistress engaged first in her household duties, then in her customary run on her bicycle before lunch; shopping, taking some flowers to the cottage hospital, exchanging the magazines for which her circle subscribed. These occupations of master and mistress enabled Egbert to evade with nice calculation the tasks that fell to him. This morning the household, as he expressed it, was "all of a boilin' jump," whereby he was vastly incommoded, being much harried. The three young men thoughtfully denied themselves the intellectual delights of their usual labours with Mr. Letham. "Lucky dawgs," said Egbert bitterly, hiding in the bathroom and watching them from the window meet down the road, confer, laugh, and skim off on their bicycles; his mistress — writing letters, talking excitedly with her husband — did everything except settle to any particular task. The result was to keep Egbert ceaselessly upon "the 'op," and he resented it utterly.

II

With the afternoon the visitors; the satisfying at last of the excitement that had thrilled Miller's Field to the marrow since the newspapers were opened.

A little difficult, the good ladies thought it, to know exactly what to say.

Some, on greeting Mrs. Letham, boldly plumped: "My dear, I *do* congratulate you!" At the other extreme of tact in grasping a novel situation, those who cleverly began, "My dear, I saw it in the 'Morning Post'!" a wary opening that enabled one to model sentiments on the lead given in reply.

"My dear, I *do* congratulate you!" "My dear, I saw it in the 'Morning Post'!" and "Ho, *do* yer, thenk yer!" from bone-tired Egbert, mimicking as he closed the door behind the one; and "Ho, *did* yer, boil yer!" closing it behind the other.

Between these forms, then, or with slight variations upon them, fell all the salutations but that of Mrs. Savile-Phillips who, arriving late, treading on Egbert's foot in her impressive halt on the threshold, called in her dashing way across the crowded drawing-room, "And where is Lady Burdon?"

She was at her tea table, closely surrounded, prettily coloured by excitement, animated, at her best, tastefully gowned in a becoming dove-grey that fortuitously had arrived from the dressmaker that morning and mingled (she felt) a tribute to her new dignity with a touch of half-mourning for the boy her relationship to whom death with a hot finger had touched to life. Thus Mrs. Letham — new Lady Burdon — took the eye and took it well. This was the moment of her triumph; and that is a moment that is fairy wand to knock asunder the

shackles of the heavier years, restoring youth; to warm and make generous the heart; to light the eye and lift the spirit. Hers, hers that moment! She the commanding and captivating figure in that assembly!

Her spirit was equal with her presence. Physically queening it among her friends, psychically she was aloft and afloat in the exaltation that her bearing advertised. Each new congratulation as it came was a vassal hand put out to touch the sceptre she chose to extend. The prattle of voices was a delectable hymn raised to her praise in her new dignity. She was mentally enthroned, queen of a kingdom all her own; and as she visualised its fair places she had a sense of herself, Cinderella-like, shedding drab garments from her shoulders, appearing most wonderfully arrayed; shaking from her skirts the dull past, with eager hands greeting a future splendidly coloured, singing to her with siren note, created for her foot and her pleasure.

Consider her state. The better to consider it, consider that something of these sensations is the lot of every woman when, on her marriage eve, a girl, sleepless she lies through that night, imaging the womanhood that waits her beyond the darkness. It is the threshold of life for woman, this night before the vow, and has no counterpart in all a man's days from boyhood to grave. How should it? The sexes are as widely sundered in habit, thought, custom, as two separate and most alien races. Love has conducted every plighted woman to this threshold and has so delectably engaged her attention on the road that she has reckoned little of the new world towards which she is speeding. Now, on her marriage eve, she is at night and alone: her eager feet upon the immediate moment beyond whose passage lies the unexplored. Love for this

space takes rest. To-morrow he will lead her blindfolded into the new country; to-night, poised upon the crest to which blindfolded he has led her, she stands and looks across the prospect, shading her eyes, atremble with ecstasy at the huge adventure. Mighty courage she has — a frail figure, barriers closing up behind her to shut forever the easy paths of maidenhood; hill and valley stretching limitless before, where lie lurking heaven knows what ravening monsters. But she is the born explorer, predestined for this frightful plunge into the unknown, heedless of its dangers, intoxicated by its spaciousness, amazingly confident in Love's power and devotion to keep her in the pleasant places. And Love — he the reckless treaty-monger between the alien races — is prone, unhappily, to lead her a dozen entangling steps down the crest, and there to leave her in the smiling hills suddenly become wilderness, in the little valleys suddenly become abyss.

Mrs. Letham had enjoyed that intoxicating moment upon the crest. Something of its sensations were hers again now; but she found their thrill a far more delectable affair. Again she was upon the crest whence an alluring prospect stretched; but now she looked with eyes not filmed by ignorance; now could have seen desert places, pitfalls, if such had been, but saw that there were none. Or so she thought.

Already, in the congratulations she was receiving, she was tasting the first sweets, plucking the first fruits with which she saw the groves behung. For the first time she found herself and her fortunes the centre of a crowded drawing-room's conversation. For the first time she enjoyed the thrill of eager attention at her command when she chose to raise her voice. It was good, good. It was sufficient to her for the moment.



But her exalted mind ran calculating ahead of it, even while she rejoiced in it. She had her little Rollo brought in to her, and kept him on her knee, and stroked his hair; and once and twice and many times went into dreams of all that now awaited him; and with an effort had to recall herself to the attentions of her guests.

As evening stole out from the trees, in shadows across the lawn and in dusk against the windows, like some stealthy stranger peering in, her party began to separate. A few closer friends clustered about her, and the conversation became more particular. Yes, it would mean leaving Miller's Field — *dear* Miller's Field; and leaving them, but never, never forgetting them. Elated, triumphant, and therefore generous, emotional, she almost believed that indeed she would be sorry to lose these friends.

As one warmed with wine has a largeness of spirit that swamps his proper self in its generous delusions, so she, warmed with triumph, was genuine enough in all her protestations. With real affection she handed over kindly Mrs. Archer, the doctor's wife, who stayed last, to the good offices of Egbert Hunt, and in a happy, happy glow of elation returned to her drawing-room. This was the beginning of it!

This the beginning of it! She drew a long breath, smiling to herself, her hands pressed together; through the glass doors giving on to the lawn she espied her husband. and smiling she went quickly across and opened them.

III

Mr. Letham was coming in from work in the garden. He had a watering-can in one hand, with the other he

trailed a rake. He was in his shirt-sleeves, and his face was damp with his exertions around the flower-beds. "Hullo! All gone?" he asked.

The warmth of her spirit caused her to extend her hands to him with a sudden, affectionate gesture:

"All, yes. Maurice, you were an old wretch! You might have come in."

"Simply couldn't, old girl. I had a squint through the window, and fled and hid behind a bush. Thousands of you; it looked awful!"

She laughed: "Miserable coward! I was hoping you would."

"Were you, though?" he said eagerly. "I'd have come like a shot if I'd known."

That made her laugh again: he was always the lover. "Well, come and have a talk now to make up," she told him. "Out here in the garden. It's frightfully hot in this room."

His face beamed. He put down the implements he was carrying, wiped a hand on his waistcoat and slipped his fingers beneath her arm. "That's a stunning dress," he said.

She gathered up the trailing skirt and glanced down at it, well pleased. "It is rather nice, isn't it?"

"Fine! You look as pretty as a picture this evening, Nellie. I tell you, I thought so, when I squinted in through the window."

"That's because I'm so happy."

"So am I." He pressed her arm to show why, and "Maurice! you are a goose," was her gay comment; but for once his foolish loverlikeness pleased her; her mood was widely charitable.

They paced the little lawn in silence. She suddenly asked, "You don't mind my being happy, do you?"

"Mind! Good Lord!" and he pressed her arm again.

"Being excited about — about it, I mean. It's natural, Maurice?"

"Of course it is. Of course it is, old girl."

"But you're not — it doesn't excite you?"

Mr. Letham was too honest, even at risk of disturbing this happy passage, to pretend the untrue. "Well, that's nothing," he said. "That's nothing. I'm so beastly slow. An earthquake wouldn't excite me."

"I don't believe it would," she laughed, then was serious. "But I'm excited," she said abruptly. "Oh, I am!" She put up her face towards the veiling sky — a dim star here and a dim star there and a faint breeze rising — and she drew a deep breath just as she had breathed deeply in the drawing-room a few moments earlier. "Oh, I am!" she repeated. "Maurice! I want to talk about it."

He was not at all conscious of the full intensity of her feelings; but for such of it as he perceived he smiled at her in his tolerant way. "Well, you say," he told her. "You do the talking."

She was silent for a considerable space; her mind run far ahead and occupied among thoughts to which she could not introduce him, for he had no place in them. That he shivered slightly recalled his presence to her. That his presence had been deliberately shut from among the castles she had been building caused her one of those qualms which (if we are kind) often sting us back from our worser self to our better nature. And she was kind, alternating ceaselessly between the many womanly parts she had and those other parts we all possess; only to be pitied if the events now quickly shaping for her tempted her too much, led her too far from the point whence kindness is recoverable.

Recalled to him and to her womanliness, "Oh, your coat!" she exclaimed. "You've been getting hot and you'll catch your death of chill. You're dreadfully careless. Where is it?"

"In the summer-house. But what rot!"

"I'll get it." She slipped her arm from his hand and ran away across the lawn. "There!" she said, returning. "Now button it up. Ah! You're all thumbs!"

She fastened it for him and turned up the collar. The action brought her face close to his. "You're jolly good to me, Nellie," he said, and his lips brushed her forehead. A kiss it had been, but she drew back a step. "Not going to have you ill on my hands," she told him brightly. Then she slipped a hand into his arm and resumed, "What are we going to do — first? I want to talk about that."

She had talked to him of it all the morning; but as if it were undiscussed — anything to preserve these happy moments — "Yes, go on," he said.

She responded eagerly. "Well, we must write to Lady Burdon, of course — Jane Lady Burdon, now, you said, didn't you? Not to-day. Better wait a day — to-morrow."

"That is what I thought."

"Yes — yes — and then you will have to go to see her. By yourself. I won't come at first." She gave a little sound of laughter. "I don't think I shall much like Jane Lady Burdon, from what you told me this morning."

He asked her: "Good lord, why, Nellie? Why, what did I tell you? I've only seen her once, years and years ago."

"You made her out proud; you said she would feel this terribly."

"That poor boy's death? Of course she would. She was devoted to him. Look, he was no more than Rollo's age when his father died. She brought him up. Been mother and father to him all his life. Imagine how she'd feel it."

"Oh, I don't mean that; feel us coming in, I mean. Proud in that way."

It was an idea that another man, though he knew it true, would have laughed aside. Mr. Letham's hopeless simplicity put him to a stumbling explanation. "Ah, but proud's not the word — not fair," he said. "She has pride; you understand the difference, don't you, old girl? A tremendous family pride. She'll feel this break in the direct descent — father to son, as it said in the newspaper, ever since there was a Burdon. It is one of their traditions, at the bottom of half their traditions, and they're simply wrapped up in that kind of thing. I should think there never was a family with so many observances — laws of its own."

"Tell me," she said: and while they paced, he spoke of this family whose style and dignity they were to take; and while he spoke, sometimes she pressed together her lips and contracted her brows as though hostile towards the pictures he made her see, sometimes breathed quickly and took a light in her eyes as though she foretasted delights that he presented. She had no romantic sense in her nature, else had been moved by such traditions of the House of Burdon as, he said, he could remember. That white roses were never permitted in the grounds of Burdon Old Manor, that no male but the head of the family might put on his hat within the threshold, that the coming of age of sons was celebrated at twenty-four, not twenty-one, — she scarcely heeded the legends at-

taching to these observances. "Rather silly," she named them, and did not condescend a reply to her husband's weak defence, "Well, they rather get you, you know, don't you think?"

He spoke of the Burdon motto, the arrogant, "I hold!" that was of the bone of Burdon character, so he said. "I remember my old grandfather telling me lots about that," he told her. "It sums them up. That's the kind they've always been: headstrong and absolutely fearless, like that poor boy, and stubborn — stubborn as mules where their rights, or their will, or their pride is concerned. Stubborn in having their own way, and stubborn in doing or not doing simply because the thing's done or not done in the traditions they're bred up in."

He stopped and bent to her with "Yes, what did you say?" but only caught her repeating to herself intensely and beneath her breath, "I hold!"

"Yes, it's rather fine, isn't it?" he said; and he went on: "Well, that's just what I mean about old Lady Burdon. She'll have felt that she was holding for her grandson, had held all these years, and now was the one, the only one, to see the tradition break, the direct succession pass. That's what I mean by saying she has pride and will feel it. That time I saw her, as I was telling you this morning, when that poor boy was about Rollo's age and I was doing a walking tour down in Wiltshire and managed to get up courage to go to Burdon Old Manor and introduce myself, I noticed it then. She was dividing all her time between the boy and a quaint kind of 'Lives of the Barons Burdon' as she called it, a manuscript life of each holder of the title, hunting up all the old records and traditions and things with the librarian; he was as keen on it as she. He . . ."

"Where will she be now, do you think?" Mrs. Letham interrupted. "In town?"

"In town for certain. She'd be sure to be where she could always get earliest news of the boy."

"In the town house? Burdon House in Mount Street, you said, didn't you? Have you ever been there? What's it like?"

"No, never been in. A whacking great place, from the outside. That's where she'll be all right, unless they've sold it."

Mrs. Letham gave him a sudden full attention. "Sold it? Why should they have sold it?"

"The ancient reason — want of money," he replied lightly.

She made no response nor responsive movement; yet some emotion that she had seemed to communicate itself to him, for looking down at her, half-whimsically, half-gravely, "I say, you don't think we've come into untold wealth, do you, Nellie?" he said.

She took her hand sharply from his arm. Much that he had said, though she could not have analysed why, had caused her kinder self to ebb. Now it left her. She answered him by asking him: "What of all those names you told me? Tell me them again."

"The property? The Burdon Old Manor property? Little Letham, and Shepwell, and Burdon, and Abbess Roding, and Nunford, and Market Roding: those, do you mean?"

"Yes, I mean those. How do you mean 'the ancient reason, want of money'?"

"Well, that's all there is, though. The money is all out of the estate. Nothing more."

She said impatiently: "Well? All those villages?"

"All those duties," he corrected her. "That's the

Burdon way of looking at it. What they make on Abbess Roding they lose on Market Roding, so to speak. It's that 'I hold!' business again. They won't sell; they won't raise rents when leases fall in; they never refuse improvements that can possibly be afforded. The tenantry have been there for generations. No Burdon would ever think of turning them off or of refusing them anything; it wouldn't enter his head. That's why I said Burdon House in Mount Street might be sold. It's unlikely, but I remember there was talk of it in my grandfather's time. It belongs to an older day, when they were wealthier. They'd sacrifice that, if need be, though it would be like a death in the family; but anything rather than the bare idea of interfering with the people they regard as a trust."

He spoke quite easily, never realising the intensity of her feelings. "Oh, it's no untold wealth," he laughed. "You mustn't think that."

She said after a little space, "Richer than we are, though?" and added, comforting herself with an old truism, "What's poverty to one is wealth to another."

"Oh, richer than we are. Good lord, yes, I hope so. I'm thinking of years ago, anyway. Things may have changed. I'm telling you of when I was a kid."

She gave a little sigh of relief and she made a little laugh at the mood she had permitted to beset her — that sigh we give and that laugh we make when we shake ourselves from vague fears, or open our eyes from disturbing dreams. Folly to be fearful! Life is a biggish field; easy to give those fears the slip! The day is here, night ridiculous! She laughed and turned smiling to her husband and proposed they should go in. "I've got an extra special little dinner for you — to celebrate," she told him.

He pressed her arm against his side. "And I've got an extra special little appetite for it," he said. "Makes me feel fearfully fit to see you so happy."

"Well, I am," she replied, and sighed her content and said again "I am!"

IV

The night ridiculous! But when night came it caught her unstrung, too excited for immediate sleep, and visited her with vague resentments, with vague but chilly fears. They came gradually. Long, long she lay awake, visioning the gleaming future. Her Rollo trod it with her — its golden paths, limitless of delights — her little son rejoicing into manhood as he walked them. She was intensely devoted to her baby Rollo, born two years before. Marriage had disappointed her; from its outset, directly she began to realise Maurice, she accounted herself robbed of all it ought to have given her. Motherhood had recompensed her; from Rollo's birth she had begun to dream dreams for him. Now! She got out of bed and went to his cradle and bent above him, most happily, most adoringly, as he slept. It was there and so occupied that the first vague, unreasonable fear came to disturb her night. It was gone as soon as it had come, and it had neither shape nor meaning. Yet its discomfort made her frown. She had frowned in the midst of happiness when Maurice was telling her of Burdon traditions, and the repetition of the action returned her mind to what had occupied it then.

At once resentments began to stir. She found herself resentful of Jane Lady Burdon, as drawn by Maurice; of the tenantry at Burdon Old Manor, who were regarded as a trust — a greedy, expensive trust on his showing;

nay, of the Old Manor itself, if saturated in traditions such as he described. Why resentful? At first she could not say, and worried. Then the reason came to her. It was the feeling that this old lady, not proud but having pride, a ridiculous distinction, this old lady, these tenantry, those traditions would resent her. Resent her? She could not get away from the thought, and it irritated her and tired her. Yes, and rob her, and that irritated and tired her the more. She began to desire sleep and could not sleep for these resentments. Resent her? Rob her? She grew angry that she could not sleep, and then suddenly calmed herself by deliberately setting herself to see how grotesque such thoughts were. After all, what could they do, even suppose they desired her hurt? It came to her, with a grim sense of the humour of it, that their own motto was against them. "I hold!" It was she who held!

"I hold!" The old motto did its new mistress its first service. It charmed her, at last, to sleep. Immediately, as it seemed to her, she passed into dreams of her amazing happiness; and in their midst the motto rose against her. In their midst the vague fear that had troubled her while she bent over her Rollo — but vague no longer — became definite and horrible. She was taunted, she was terrified by some force that told her it was all untrue; that tortured her she was befooled and did not hold and should never hold the amazement she fancied hers. Terrified and struggling, "I hold!" she cried. It became the delirium of her sleep. Again and again "I hold! I hold!" and always from that force the answer, quiet but most terribly assured: "No, you do not! Nay, I hold!" Horror and panic overcame her. She was so nearly awake that she tried to awake but could not. "I hold! I hold!" "No, you do not. Nay, I hold!"



There was no escape, no escape. . . . When at last her fevered brain broke out of sleep, she awoke to hear her own voice cry it aloud in agony: "I hold!" and shaking, unnerved, thanked God for young morning stealing about the room, and none and nothing to rebuke or contradict that waking cry.

CHAPTER V

MISREADING A PEERESS

I

We will give them their title now.

Events fell out much as the new Lady Burdon had planned. On the day following the news, the new Lord Burdon wrote a few sympathetic lines to Jane Lady Burdon; two days later he received an acknowledgment from the house in Mount Street. She would like to see him, Jane Lady Burdon, wrote, but she would like a little time in which to accommodate herself to her sad affliction. Perhaps he would arrange to call on that day week; and meanwhile, if he could see Mr. Pemberton, they would be spared much explanation relative to the sudden change.

"Rather cold," was Lady Burdon's comment; but her attention was taken by another letter brought in with Jane Lady Burdon's by Egbert Hunt, as they sat at early breakfast, and overlooked in the excitement. "And Mr. Pemberton — who is Mr. Pemberton?" she asked, but had opened this other envelope while she spoke, taken the gist of its letter at a glance, and herself answered her question, looking up with flushed face and sparkling eyes. "He's the solicitor," she said.

Lord Burdon nodded. "So he is. The name comes back to me."

"This is from him — to you. It's all right. He says

it's all right, Maurice. He's the lawyer. He knows. He admits it."

"Sounds as though he'd committed a crime. What does he admit?"

She was very happy, so she laughed. "Listen!" and she read him the letter in which, in stilted, lawyer like terms, Matthew Pemberton (as it was signed) formally advised him of the death in action on the northwestern frontier of India, and of his succession to the barony and entailed estates. The firm of Pemberton, it appeared, had for many generations enjoyed the honour of acting for the house of Burdon, and, acting on Jane Lady Burdon's instructions, Matthew Pemberton desired to propose an interview "here or at your lordship's residence, as may be most convenient to your lordship."

"Maurice!" Lady Burdon exclaimed, and handed him the letter; and when he had read it, "There! There's no doubt now, is there?"

He had frowned over it as though it troubled him. At her words he looked up and smiled at her beaming face and patted her hand. "Why, you never had any doubt, had you?" he asked.

She gave the slightest possible shiver; but with it shook off the recollection that had caused it. "Oh, I don't know," she answered. "I do believe I had; yes, I had. I couldn't realise it sometimes. There was nothing — nothing to go on. Now there is, though!" And she touched the letters that were the magic carpet arrived to wing her from the delirium of that night toward the amazement that night had threatened.

She exclaimed again, "Now there is!" and, pushing back her chair, rose vigorously to her feet, casting aside forever (so she told herself) that nightmare dream and animatedly breaking into "plans." Too animated to be

still, too excited to eat, gaily, and with a commanding banter that rendered him utterly happy, she easily influenced her husband, against his purpose, to bid Mr. Pemberton make the proposed interview at Miller's Field, not Bedford Row. "'At your lordship's residence,'" she laughed. "It's his place to do the running about, not yours. And tell him — I'll help you to write the letter — tell him to come the day after to-morrow, not to-morrow. Don't let him think we're bursting with eagerness."

"By gum, he'd better not see you, then," Lord Burdon said grimly.

She gave him a playful pinch. "Oh, I'll do the high and haughty stare all right," she told him, and she laughed again and ran gaily humming to the Hon. Rollo Letham in the garden.

II

Mr. Pemberton, on arrival, proved incapable of much of that running about, in the literal sense of the term, that Lady Burdon had pronounced to be his place.

"Here he is!" Lady Burdon said, watching through the drawing-room window from where she sat, as a closed station-fly drew up before the gate. "Here he is!" There was a longish pause before the cab door opened, and then a walking-stick came out and tapped about in a fumbling sort of way until it hit the step. A very thin leg came groping down the stick, its foot poking about nervously as though to make sure that the step was stable. "Good gracious!" Lady Burdon exclaimed. "The poor old man!"

She forgot the high and haughty stare premeditated for the interview, and she crossed to the window, wom-

anly and womanishly alarmed. The knee above the trembling leg took a jerky shot or two at stiffening, then stiffened suddenly and took the weight of a little wisp of an old man, who swung suddenly out upon it, whirled half around as the gusty breeze took him and, clutching frantically against the side of the cab with one hand, with the other made agitated prods of his stick at the road desperately far beneath.

"Oh, goodness!" Lady Burdon cried. "He'll kill himself! And that idiot like a frozen pig on the box! Maurice!" But she was quicker than her husband and, the high and haughty stare completely abandoned, was swiftly from the room, down the path, through the gate, and with firm young hands under a shaky old arm, just as the little old man, unable to balance longer, was dropping stick and leg towards the ground and in danger of collapsing tremendously upon them.

She landed him safe. "The road slopes so frightfully here, doesn't it?" she said. "I am afraid you are shaken."

The little old man, very visibly shaken by the fearful adventure, essayed to straighten his bent old frame. He raised his silk hat and stood bareheaded before her. "You saved me from that," he said. "It was very, very kind of you. I am clumsy and stupid at moving about."

She was flushed by her run, the breeze was in her hair; she looked pretty and she was quite natural. "Oh, I saw you," she smiled. "I ought to have come before. Let me take your arm. The path is steep; we are on the side of a hill, as you see."

She swung open the gate with one hand and put the other beneath his arm.

He seemed to hesitate, looking at her curiously. "Oh,

I am all right when I am on my legs," he said, with a little laugh. "Well, well — it is very, very kind of you," and he accepted the aid she offered.

"It *is* steep, you see," — she smiled down at him, — "and rough. It ought to be rolled, but we have the idlest gardener boy in the world. You are Mr. Pemberton, aren't you? I am — I am Lady Burdon."

He halted in his nice little steps and looked full up at her. "I am very glad to know that," he said simply, and put himself again to the task of making the house.

III

Mr. Pemberton was more than pleased; he was intensely relieved and intensely happy. His thoughts, as he came down in the train to Miller's Field, had caused his face to wear a nervous, a wistful, almost an appealing, look. Bound up in inherited devotion to the noble house whose service was handed down in his firm as the title itself was handed down, he had feared, he had dreaded what manner of people the tragic break in the famous direct succession might have brought to the name he loved. Nothing could so well have reassured him as that most womanly action of Lady Burdon when she ran to his assistance at the gate; nothing could so well have affirmed the confidence with which he turned to her husband, come to the door to meet them, as the simple honesty of character imprinted on Lord Burdon's face and expressed in his greeting. Both impressions were sharpened as they sat talking at tea. Mr. Pemberton had come to talk business; he found himself drawn by this sympathetic atmosphere into speaking intimately of the gay young life whose cruel termination had caused his visit.

Clearly he had been deeply attached to that young life; he speaks of it in the jerky, disconnected sentences of one that does not trust his voice too long, for fear it may betray him; and when he comes to his subject's young manhood, after eulogy of childhood and youth, clearly Lady Burdon is interested. She draws her chair a trifle towards him, and with her elbow on the low tea-table, cups her chin in the palm of her hand, the fingers against her lips, watches him and attends him closely. Her throat and face are dusky, her wrist and hand are white against them. Her eyes have a deep and kind look. She makes a gentle picture.

Encouraged by her sympathy, "He was a little wild," says Mr. Pemberton. "I am afraid a little inclined to be wild. . . . Always so full of spirits, you see . . . eager . . . careless, reckless perhaps, impetuous . . . lovable — ah, me, very lovable. . . .

"I was very fond of him, Lady Burdon," he says apologetically, "very fond;" and he stumbles into an example of what he is pleased to call the young man's impetuous carelessness. It is of his last months in England, before he sailed for India, that this deals. Between June and August, having leave from his regiment, he disappeared, it seems; was completely lost sight of by his grandmother and his friends. Towards the end of August he appeared again. "Not himself — not quite himself," says Mr. Pemberton, shaking his head as though over some recollection that troubled him, "and no explanation of his absence, and, when the chance came — General Sheringham was a relation, you know — wild to get out to this frontier 'show,' as he called it.

"Typical of him," says Mr. Pemberton after a pause, and smiling sadly at Lady Burdon. "Typical. A law

to himself he would always be, and not responsible to any one for what he chose to do. A Burdon trait that; and he was a Burdon of Burdons."

Lady Burdon asks a question, breaking into Mr. Pemberton's history for the first time. "But that really is extraordinary, Mr. Pemberton," she says. "Wouldn't Lady Burdon — wouldn't his grandmother — have felt anxious during that disappearance, and wouldn't she have questioned him when he came back?"

"Not unless he seemed disposed to tell her. In a way — in a way, you know, relations between them were a little difficult. Poor boy" — and Mr. Pemberton gives a sad little laugh — "poor boy, he often came to me in a great way, and her ladyship, too, has had occasion. He, on his side, passionately devoted to her, hating to hurt her, but enormously high-spirited, difficult to handle. And she, on hers, making all the world of him and a little apt on that account to claim too much from him, if you follow me. He sometimes chafed — chafed, you know; hating to hurt her but restless of her control, her claim. Latterly she had to be very tactful with him. No, she wouldn't have questioned him unless he seemed disposed to tell her."

They are interrupted here by the entrance of baby Rollo on his way to bed, for it is getting late. "The rummiest little beggar," says Lord Burdon, introducing his small son. "Not much more than eighteen months, and solemn enough for an archbishop, aren't you, Rollo?"

The solemn one, pale and noticeably quiet and far from strong looking, justifies this character by having no smiles, though Mr. Pemberton greets him cheerfully and says approvingly: "Rollo, eh? The Burdon name. *His* name," he adds, and looks at Lady Burdon, who gives him a gentle smile of understanding.

IV

Mr. Pemberton looked after her very gratefully when she excused herself to take the child up-stairs. The door closed, he turned to Lord Burdon. "Nice—nice," he began in a stifled kind of voice, "to have a little son growing up—to watch. We watched young Lord Burdon—that poor boy—growing up—anxiously—so anxiously. . . ."

He gave a nervous little laugh. "When I say 'we'—you've no idea with what a terrible air of proprietorship the family is regarded by those, like myself, attached to it for generations, by those dependent on it. We looked so eagerly, so eagerly as the time drew on, to his coming of age. He was wanted so."

"Wanted?" Lord Burdon asked. "Wanted?" He pronounced the word heavily, as though he had an inkling of the answer and was apprehensive.

It started Mr. Pemberton on a recital that he spoke with seeming difficulty and yet as though he had prepared it. It occupied longer than either knew, and Lord Burdon, before it was finished, was sitting sunk low in his chair, as though what he heard oppressed him. The little old lawyer spoke of difficulties in connection with the estate; the diminished rent roll; the urgent necessity for comprehensive improvements essential to make the land pay its way; the long-urged necessity for the sale of Burdon House in Mount Street, heavily mortgaged and the interest an insupportable drain on the estate. It led him to why they had looked so anxiously for the coming of age. Everything that was essential was impossible, he showed, in the reign of gentle Jane Lady Burdon, who felt that she held in sacred trust for her grandson and would suffer no risks in raising of loans, nor depredation of her charge by sale of the town property. He had no

eloquence, this devoted little lawyer, but he had earnestness that seemed to him who listened to fill the room, as it were, with living shapes of duties, demands, traditions of a great heritage that marshalled before him and looked to him to be carried forward, as soldiers to a leader.

A change in Mr. Pemberton's tone aroused him.

"He was wanted so," Mr. Pemberton said jerkily, and stopped.

No response, and in a funny little cracked voice, "Well, he's dead," Mr. Pemberton said.

Lord Burdon raised his eyes, contracted with the trouble that had given him that drooped, oppressed appearance while the other spoke, dim, clouded as with looking at something that menaced; and their eyes met — two very simple men.

Mr. Pemberton stretched out fumbling hands. He cried blunderingly and appealingly, his mouth twisting: "It has affected me — this death, this change. I am only an old man — a devoted old man. As we looked to him, so now we look to you."

"Look to me!" Lord Burdon said slowly. "Look to me! Good God, Pemberton, I funk it!" he cried. "I funk it and I hate it. I'm not the sort. I wish I'd been left alone. I wish to God I had!"

There followed his words a silence of the intense nature caused by speech that has been intense. In that silence, consciousness of some other personality in the room caused Mr. Pemberton to turn suddenly in his chair. He turned to see Lady Burdon standing in the doorway. She was not in the act of entering. She was standing there; and for the briefest space, while Mr. Pemberton looked at her and she at him, she just stood, erect, her head a trifle unduly high, with estimating eyes and with purposed mouth.

V

It had been an anxious Mr. Pemberton that came down to Miller's Field. It was a reassured Mr. Pemberton that stayed there, but a gravely disturbed Mr. Pemberton that went back to town. He knew Lady Burdon had been listening, the look he had seen on her face informed him of her displeasure with what she had heard, and he knew that in his first estimate of her he had misread her.

For he read her look aright. In her husband's cry — his weak, contemptible cry — in what she had heard of the little lawyer's statements and proposals — his tears and prayers of duties — she knew hostility to her plans, to her dreams, to her pleasures. Her estimating eyes that met Mr. Pemberton's inquired the strength of that hostility; her purposed mouth was the mirror of her determination against it.



CHAPTER VI

MISCALCULATING A PEER

I

THE little clock that is perched high over the vast fireplace in the library at Burdon House, Mount Street, marks a shade before ten of the evening. Its delicate ticking joins with the fluttering of the flames, and with the steady scratch of Mr. Librarian Amber's pen, to make the only sounds in this dignified apartment with its high-bred air, that has known many a Burdon and that shortly is to acknowledge another bearer of the title and serenely give farewell to the lady seated before the fire.

A gracious lady of many sorrows, as the Vicar of Little Letham parish, in a surprising flight, had named Jane Lady Burdon on the previous Sunday — and rightly named her. Sorrow has companioned Jane Lady Burdon before; now again is called whence it has lightly slumbered — walks hand in hand with the gentle lady, is her bedfellow, crouches on the hearth beside her as she sits, drooping slightly, in the high-backed chair, fingers enlocked on lap, eyes dimly upon the flames.

Lord Burdon, who has stepped into the dead boy's shoes — (Ah, Sorrow, walk here and here with me. Look, Sorrow, where he used to sport and run!) — has paid his visit that afternoon; sympathetic little Mr. Pemberton, with his papers and documents, has occupied a part of her morning. It has been a trying day for her. Her only desire now is to be left alone with her thoughts.

(Come away, come away, Sorrow, Sorrow; and hold me close, and open me his prattling lips, his strong young lips.)

II

Mr. Librarian Amber — very conscious of Sorrow crouching there, but busy, busy — is writing at a table behind the drooping figure in the high-backed chair. The bald top of Mr. Amber's narrow head, nose hard after his pen like a diligent bloodhound on a slow scent, shines between the splendid yellow candles in their tall, silver holders that light his work. Neat little packets of papers, neatly arranged, dot the polished surface of the table, like islands set in a still, dark sea about the greater island that is Mr. Amber's manuscript. On a chair by Mr. Amber's side is a large, slim volume held by a gilt clasp and lettered on its cover of white vellum:

Percival Rollo Redpath Letham
XIIth Baron Burdon

He is engaged, Mr. Librarian Amber, on that "Lives of the Barons Burdon" of which Lord Burdon had spoken to his wife, walking in the garden of Hillside.

Then that little clock perched over the mantelpiece tinkles the hour of ten.

"How do you progress, Mr. Amber?" Jane Lady Burdon inquires gently.

Mr. Amber — constitutionally nervous — starts, drops his pen, grabs at it as it rolls for the floor, misses it in the stress of a short-sighted fumble, makes a distressed *Tch-tch!* as it rattles to the boards, clears his throat, starts on one reply and, in the manner of nervous persons suddenly interrogated, strangles it at birth and has a shot at fortune with another.

"I have almost got — I am just concluding the newspaper reports of the fight, my lady. Very nearly at the end." He recollects a resolve to be bright in order to cheer my lady, so he adds with a funny little pop: "Almost done!" and then with a brisk little puff blows imaginary dust from his manuscript. "Almost done! *Hoof!*"

"I will read it over to-morrow, Mr. Amber, immediately after breakfast. To-day is Friday. By Monday you should have finished, I think, and the book will be ready to go into its place at the Manor. You will come with me when I go down there next week, Mr. Amber, and we will put it in its place together. I shall be glad to see it in its place before I leave: all the Lives finished — our little hobby, Mr. Amber;" and her gracious ladyship of many sorrows puts into the words the smile that faintly touches her lips.

Mr. Amber, desperately agitated and pleased by this coupling of himself with his dear mistress, takes from the warmth of his happiness courage sufficient to introduce to her a matter that has been troubling him. He gets awkwardly to his feet, a spare, stooping figure, mild of face, little over fifty but looking more, frowns horribly at his chair for the noise it makes upon the polished floor as he pushes it back, and comes forward, twisting the fingers of his hands about one another.

"My lady — yes, I will surely finish by Monday. Your ladyship will forgive me — intruding myself — your ladyship speaks of leaving — I am — if I may venture — so attached — I scarcely —"

He is quite painfully agitated. His fingers, tightly locked now by their twistings, present a figure of his halting sentences come to a final tangle, an ultimate and hopeless knot.

Her gracious ladyship of many sorrows smiles in her kind way. "Dear Mr. Amber, you should know, of course. I have been thoughtless of you in my sorrow. I am going to my sister in York, Mr. Amber — Mrs. Eresby, you remember. Here nor the Manor is no longer my home, you understand. Indeed, how should I stay in houses of sad memories only?"

Mr. Amber murmurs "Ah — my lady!" and she continues: "I intend a last visit to the Manor — to take leave of our dear friends, Mr. Amber, and to collect a few — memories. I would go now, but I have first to meet Lady Burdon. Lord and Lady Burdon will very kindly come here for that purpose on Monday so that we may know one another for a few days."

She pauses and smiles inquiringly as though to ask Mr. Amber if he is now sufficiently informed. He blinks considerably, starts to work at his hands again, and suddenly says with a mouth all twisted: "It will be very — strange — to me to be parted from your ladyship."

She extends a gentle hand towards his that twist and twist, touching them softly: "Dear Mr. Amber. It has been the pleasantest friendship."

He says stupidly and brokenly, "What will I do?"

"You must go on living with the books," she tells him. "Why, what would they do without you, or you without them? I will speak to Lord Burdon. You must live on just the same in the Manor library where we have been together so often — all of us. I shall like to think of you there. It is my wish, Mr. Amber."

She says gently, "There!" as he clutches her hand to his lips. "I will go to bed now. I think I hear Colden coming for me," and as her maid enters, she rises.

Mr. Amber tries for words. That twisting mouth forbids them, and he turns to hold the door open.

"Thank you. Good night, Mr. Amber. Here is our kind Colden so thoughtful for my sleep. I am ready, Colden. Yes, I will take your arm. Good night, Mr. Amber." And as Mr. Amber stands watching, there comes to him faintly across the great hall: "We'll rest a moment here, Colden. A little trying, these stairs. Do you remember how he used to take me up? He never missed a night when he was home, did he? Do you remember how he made us laugh about this seat . . . ?"

Then Mr. Amber returns to the library, closes the door and eases emotion by a trumpet blast upon his nose.

III

Mr. Amber took a seat before the fire. He was unsettled, he found, for further progress that night upon the work that had engaged him at the table. But his mind turned to it and from it to the eleven fine volumes into whose company it would go, completing the lives of the Barons Burdon that were the fruits of many years of loving labour — result of "our little hobby." In memory he trod again those happy days — saw himself installed librarian at Burdon Old Manor, a bookish youth, weak-backed, weak-eyed, son and despair of a tenant farmer; rehearsed again that youth's aimless, browsing years among the books, acquiring strange and various knowledge from the shelves, developing affections, habits, tastes that, as with tentacles, anchored him by heart and mind to the house of Burdon. Mr. Amber moved restlessly in his chair and came to the beginning of the great scheme, propounded by her gracious ladyship, that was to become "our little hobby," as immediately it became the purpose and enthusiasm of his life. Well, it was done — or almost done. The results of desperately exciting

scratching about the library — among distressed old books, among family trees, among deeds, letters, parchments, rolls, records — were in eleven fine manuscript volumes — only the twelfth to finish.

A leisurely volume this twelfth, now lying on the table behind Mr. Amber's chair. Written up during its subject's short life — dear and most well-beloved to Mr. Amber every moment of it — the volume is as naturally detailed as some of the earlier volumes are naturally scrappy. Pettily detailed, perhaps. Mr. Amber starts with the precise hour and moment — 6 : 15½ A.M. — of the birth of the Hon. Rollo Percival Redpath Letham; notes his colouring — fair; his weight at successive infantile months — lusty beyond the average, it would appear; date of his first articulate speech; date of first stumbling run across the nursery floor — and suchlike small beer. His father's death is chronicled ("cf. vol. XI, pp. 196 *et seq.*") and he is shown to be yet in his third year when he becomes twelfth Baron Burdon. . . . Date of measles. . . . Date of whooping cough. . . . First riding lesson. . . . Preparatory school. . . . First holidays. . . . First shooting lesson. . . . Puts a charge of shot into a keeper. It is all very closely detailed. It is detailed so closely that a gap towards the end is made conspicuous: and this is precisely that gap occupied by the "disappearance" of which Mr. Pemberton had spoken in the drawing-room at Hillside. The chronicle, that is to say, is brought very fully up to the May in which, as it shows, my lord suddenly went down to Burdon Old Manor from London, his grandmother being at Mount Street, and thence for a long holiday. It jumps to October and at once begins again to be remarkably detailed, "Our Own Correspondent's" account of the frontier engagement waiting on the table there to conclude it.

But of this May to October period, covering the June to August of which Mr. Pemberton had spoken, Mr. Amber, like Mr. Pemberton, for the good reason that he knew nothing of how my lord occupied it, has nothing to say.

Let it be said. My lord was in that June secretly married in London: a matter closely germane to this history, and now to be examined.





BOOK TWO

A BOOK OF THE SAME SIZE, ILLUSTRATING THE ELEMENT OF FOLLY



BOOK TWO

A BOOK OF THE SAME SIZE, ILLUSTRATING THE ELEMENT OF FOLLY

CHAPTER I

LOVE TRIMS WRECKERS' LAMPS

I

On a May morning, then, love in his heart, purpose in his eye, gathering in his careless hand the meshes that he is going to tug, shaking the unconsidered lives they bind — Rollo Percival Redpath Letham, twelfth Baron Burdon, "Roly" to his gay young comrades of the clubs and messes, was set down at Great Letham by the express from London.

Great Letham marks the nearest approach of the railway to the sequestered villages that touch their hats to the Burdon Old Manor folk. It stands at the head of a country that rolls away on either hand in down and valley. Roughly, Great Letham centres the high lands that bound this prospect on its nearer side, and from its outskirts there strikes away a great shoulder of down that thrusts like a massive viaduct straight and far to join the further hills. From a distance this natural viaduct admits to minds however stubbornly practical the similitude of a giant's arm. Rugged and brown and scarred it lies, not green in greenest summer; and the humped shoulder whence it springs, and the great mounds in which it swells along its path, present

it as a mighty limb out-thrust to hold away the hills in which its fist is buried. Plowman's Ridge, they call it; and afoot upon it, it is kinder of aspect. Aloof, aloft, alone, the wayfarer stands here, and breathes or breasts the ceaseless wind that saunters or like a live thing thunders down its track; and has on either hand a spreading valley, whence curls the smoke of scattered hamlets, uprise the spires, come the faint sounds of creature life and gleam the fields, as spread upon a palette, coloured in obedience to this and that design of husbandry.

The railway skirts the eastward vale; along the tranquil westward slope the Burdon hamlets sleep. Viewed from the Ridge, they are ridiculously alike; ridiculously equidistant one from the next; ridiculously tethered, as it were, along the foot of the Ridge — like boats along a shore; ridiculously small to have separate names, but named in their order outwards from Great Letham: Market Roding and Abbess Roding and Nunford — linked by those names with the monastic ruins at Upabbot in the eastward vale; Shepwell and Burdon and Little Letham. They are tethered to the Ridge, and the Ridge is the most direct communication between them. Visitors from village to village, or from Great Letham to any, climb the slope and use the Ridge, rather than plod the winding roads that, as twelfth Baron Burdon has often declared, "take you about two miles from where you want to get before they let you loose to go there."

He struck out along the Ridge now.

Burdon village was his destination; and as he pressed his way towards it, putting up his face to snuff the familiar wind, speeding ahead his thoughts to what he came to seek, twelfth Baron Burdon showed himself a very

personable young man. His tawny hair he wore closely cropped about his strong young head; beneath a straight nose he grew a little clump of fair moustache shaved bluntly away at the corners of a firm mouth. At a bold right-angle his jaw came cleanly from his throat; and his chin was thick and round, matching his open grey eyes to advertise purpose and command. A Burdon of Burdons Mr. Pemberton had named him. A high-spirited young man, vigorous, alert; very boyish in mind, very dominant of character. A Burdon of Burdons. Through a long line the bone of whose quality was their "I hold!" twelfth Baron Burdon inherited a spirit that, when crossed, was quick to be unsheathed as from their scabbards the eager swords of remote ancestors were quick, — dangerous as they. "Enormously high-spirited, difficult to handle," Mr. Pemberton had told new Lady Burdon. It was handling he could not brook. The lightest feel of the curb threw up his head as the fine-tempered colt's. Brow and lips would assume signs that spoke, even to one unacquainted with him, the imperious resolve of mastery.

He was in pursuit of mastery now.

II

As he came abreast of Burdon he edged down the Ridge, making towards a little copse that ran up from a garden behind the last cottage in the village street, the nearest to Little Letham. In the roadway this cottage displayed, suspended from its porch, the notice, painted in white letters on a black board:

POST OFFIC

(The painter had misjudged the space at his disposal but had added the missing E on the back of the board,

"Case," as he explained, "unnybody be that dense as to turn her round to see what her do mean.")

The cottage served in those days for the reception and distribution of all the letters of the westward vale, a community little bothered with correspondence; and "Post Offic" was conducted by a slight little woman whom some called Postmum, some Miss Oxford. She was the daughter of a former vicar of Little Letham; to twelfth Baron Burdon she was Audrey's sister.

Deep in the trees, as he approached the copse, the sharp white of a skirt caught his eager eye. Taking a grassy path, he went noiselessly down and presently was separated from his Audrey by the dense thorn that hedged the tiny glade in which he found her. A basket of young fern roots was beside her and she was stooped, her back towards him, exploring in the undergrowth.

He thought to steal up to her, and tried. The dense thorn locked him, and she heard him and turned swiftly towards him.

She was flushed with her stooping. Now a deeper flush rose beneath her colour, sinking it in a warmer glow that stained her exquisitely from throat to brow. The dark violet's shade was in her eyes; when her colour abated, the pale rose's delicacy might have been shamed against the fairness of her skin. She wore no hat; her soft brown locks unruled the ribbon at her neck, and the breeze stirred her hair in little waves about her temples. Her arms were bare where she had thrust her sleeves beneath her elbows. She stood poised, as one might say, upon the feet of surprise; and her lips were slightly parted, her gentle bosom seeming to hold her breath as though she feared the smallest sigh would waft away the sudden gladness that had caught it.

She just whispered, "Roly!"

"I'm caught in this da — infernal bush," Roly cried, struggling.

"I wasn't to expect you for a week, you wrote."

He began to writhe and wrench. "You needn't. I shall stay here forever, I believe."

She gave the merriest laugh: "You're simply fixed!"

"Wait till I get at you!" He tried and was more firmly held. "I say, what the *dickens* has happened to me?"

She put her hands together, enjoying his plight as a child that bends forward at a play. "You'll *never* get through there, Roly. You'll have to go back."

He wrenched and struggled: "Go back! There's a great spike or something sticking into me!"

His struggles broke a network of branches at his waist. A thorny bough sprang loose and whipped beneath his chin, forcing up his head.

"Good Lord! Look here, Audrey, I shall cut my throat and bleed to death; or this dashed spike will come slick through my back in a minute and impale me!"

"Roly! If you knew how funny you look!"

Her tone, the way in which (as it presented itself to him) she "squirmed" with childlike glee, caused him to laugh the jolliest laugh. No quality of hers attracted him as this fresh and innocent and childlike happiness that was her first characteristic; in none he found so great delight as in the fount of innocence through whose fresh stream came all her thoughts and words like young things at play.

He laughed the jolliest laugh: "Well, I've not come all the way from town just to look funny. I tell you, it's serious. I've never imagined such a fix. I'm dashed if I can move a finger now. Audrey, if you've got a

woman's heart that feels, you'll help me out. This infernal thing under my chin — just move that and I'll show you how we fight in the dear old regiment — *Damn!*"

"Oh, it has cut you!" she cried, all concern as a moment before she had been all glee.

A step brought her face within a hand of his. She found place for her fingers between the thorns of the bramble beneath his chin. She drew the branch downwards, and the action caused her to bend towards him until their brows and eyes and lips were level. She looked directly into his eyes and he directly into hers; and each read there those dear and ardent mysteries that love far better images than ever love can voice.

He no more than breathed, "Kiss me, Audrey."

She waited for the smallest part of a moment. Entranced, enthralled, they only heard a lark that was a speck above them send down a tiny melody, and far upon the down a sheep-bell's distant note. Love's thralldom and Love's music to his thrall. The oldest play that mortals play; and never know befooled were often meeter than enthralled, nor better an ass to bray than some hymn seem to rise in benison. She kissed him tenderly upon the lips; gave the smallest sigh and breathed, "Dear Roly!"

Comic were the word for such a thing.

III

Comic, and comic that which followed when he, released, was with her in the glade and, seated by her, took her hands and bent her to his purpose.

"Now, listen to me, Audrey. Put both your hands in mine."

She responded as he bade her, performing surely the most beautiful action in the world as she gave her hands to his. All human life has no act more beautiful than the weaker hand confided to the stronger, nor any nearer Godhood than when strong hand takes the weak.

He enclosed her hands within his own. "Listen to me, Audrey," he repeated; and, as her hands had been her spirit, he possessed and drew her spirit on.

Yet comic is the word: for here — he planning, she agreeing — they made the plans they thought should make all bliss, all happiness their own; here, in fact, trimmed wreckers' lamps to shipwreck happy lives. He had determined upon secret marriage with her, and had determined it as the perfect solution of difficulties whose consideration was in some degree creditable to him. For as he told himself, and told his Audrey now, nothing prevented him from openly declaring his intention of contracting a marriage that would cause a breach between himself and his grandmother; nothing but the impossibility of enduring such a breach; that was unthinkable.

"Passionately devoted to his grandmother," Mr. Pemberton had told; "and she, for her part, making all the world of him." It was precisely this uncommon devotion between him and his dear "Gran" that drove him into torment of perplexity when first his heart informed him life without Audrey was insupportable. With utmost content he had surrendered himself into the object of Gran's adoring pride and, as such, into her control of her dear possession. As he grew older, that control had sometimes come to irk a little. "He sometimes chafed — chafed, if you follow me," Mr. Pemberton had said. But the quality of that chafing required better understanding than even Mr. Pemberton could

give it. It was not at conflict of will between himself and Gran that Roly chafed; he knew his own determined character well enough to know that if he liked he could override her will as he overrode that of others who thought to oppose him. Where he chafed was where his devotion to her pricked him. He could not bear the thought of giving her distress; and he would sometimes chafe when — at this, at that, at some impulse or boyish fling of his — he thought her distress unreasonable; unreasonable because it shackled him unfairly; because either he would submit to it, or, taking his way, would suffer greatly, be robbed of his pleasure, at thought of having caused it.

But always, when the thing was over, be glad he had given way to her or most desperately grieved he had pained her. He knew that he was everything to her; how hurt her then?

With such the measure of his love for her, such the devotion between them, and such that devotion's price, what a situation was presented for his perplexity when Audrey came to occupy his heart! She had been his playmate in his childhood at Burdon Old Manor, she at the Vicarage. When her father died, Gran had expressed her fondness for his daughters by using her influence to procure the establishment of a post-office at Burdon and persuading the elder sister to conduct it, thus keeping them, as she had said, "near us." That was one thing; a head of the house of Burdon's marriage into so humble a degree — and that her Roly — he knew to be unthinkably another. She had great plans for great alliance for him — at some future date. At some future date! At her great age and at his extreme youth she could scarcely think of him as man — always as boy. It was one of the things that sometimes chafed

him. But when, as had happened, the subject of marriage came up between them, and he would laugh at her immense ideas of his value, she would always end so pathetically: "But, Roly, how shall I bear any one to come between us?"

Rehearsing it all, "How — how in God's name?" he had desperately cried to himself, "can I tell her of Audrey?" She whom he could never bear to distress — how give her this vital hurt? She from whom — for the suffering it would cause her — he could never endure to be parted, how deliberately put her away? He would tell her his intention; how endure what she would say, or not say? He would carry out his purpose and she would leave him and must shortly die; and how endure her death in such circumstances? Or, haply, he would prevail on her to stay with him; and she, supplanted, jealous of Audrey and gentle Audrey fearing her. And how endure that?

No — to create such a breach insupportable, and insupportable life without Audrey. What then?

It came to him as complete solution, and as complete solution he pressed it now on Audrey, that he would marry Audrey first, then after a little while tell. The more he examined it, the more obvious, the less impossible of failure it seemed. "Gran, dear," he imagined himself saying, taking his opportunity in one of those frequent moments when, out driving with her or sitting alone with her in the evening, she loved just to sit silent, resting her hand on his,— "Gran, dear, I've something to tell you. I've done something and done it without telling you, so as to have you go on living with me like we've always lived together. Gran, I'm married — Audrey, Audrey Oxford; you remember, dear?"

Imagining it, he could imagine her arms about him.

"Gran, I'm married" — easy and kind. "Gran, I'm going to marry, going to marry Audrey Oxford" — cruel, impossible!

The solution removed also an obstacle to their mating on Audrey's side — her sister. Their courtship had been carried on against her sister's disapproval. Maggie was twenty years older than Audrey, more mother to her than sister, and sharp-tongued in the matter of Roly's frequent visits, the more surely to avert the disaster in which she believed they must end.

"In time — it's only a question of time," she had once said to Audrey, "he will forget you, turn to his own position and responsibilities in life — leave you broken-hearted. How else can it end?"

And Audrey in tears: "What if I tell you he has asked me to marry him?"

"He has asked you that?"

"Maggie, he has."

"Has he told Lady Burdon?"

"Not yet, because —"

"Ah!"

And Audrey: "Oh, how can you say you love me?"

And Maggie: "Audrey! Audrey!"

And Audrey: "Maggie, I didn't mean that."

And Maggie, steeling her heart: "But you think it: the first result of him. You are girl and boy; you don't understand. Why, I, who would die if you were to die, would rather see you dead than betrothed to him. If it ended in marriage, it would end in misery."

And later she had said to him: "If you break Audrey's heart, I will never forgive you. That's a poor threat. I would find a way perhaps —"

So there was Maggie stood in the way; and the solution found a way round Maggie. And there was lastly

all the clatter of his friends, all the active disapproval of his elders; and the solution found an easy way around that. He could not hurt Gran; he could not conciliate Maggie; he could not face himself gossiped of, implored, advised, reproved; and the solution offered an easy way around it all. Easily winning Audrey to it, — her hands in his, his spirit possessing hers — he came to details. He had examined and arranged everything. He had made inquiries as to Registry Office marriages. They were both of age. There was a residence formality: well, she was coming on a visit to a girl friend in Kensington; he would take a room in a hotel in the district. They would meet at the Registry "one fine day." Long leave from his regiment was due. They would go on the continent — "all over the place, the most gorgeous time" — and afterwards — easy as all the rest was easy — Gran should be told.

He ended: "Audrey — married!"

And she: "Roly! . . . Oh, Roly!"

Comic were the word for such a thing.

IV

Comic the word; but if, instead, you choose to judge them and to consider preposterous his arguments of the case between his Gran and his Audrey and preposterous his solution of it, beg you remember that life is going to be an impossible affair for us, a thing to drive us mad, if we are going to judge it by the standard of the correct and noble characters that you and I possess. By some means or another we must stoop down to the level of our neighbours and try to judge from there. Dowered with all the virtues, as you and I are, it is the easiest thing in the world to be impatient with another's folly,

to despise him for it, to indicate how little moral courage will rid him of its effects; nay, to go further, and to declare it inconceivable that such blunders and follies and misbehaviours, as for example those upon which Roly and his Audrey were now embarked, can really have been committed. But that is a stage too far. We must not run our excusable intolerance of folly to the length of calling impossible even the most absurd actions, even the most incredible weakness of character. The whole history of mankind results precisely from these absurdities and these incredibilities. On the one hand, we should still and should all be in Eden if it were not so; on the other, there is the distinctly moving thought that you and I, faultless, are dependent for our entertainment on exactly these impossibilities of character in others: but for them we should never enjoy the delicious thrill of being shocked, never (the thing is unthinkable) be able to thank God we are not as others are.

No, we must accept these impossible follies on the part of our neighbours: but to understand them — nay, if we are too utterly high and they too utterly low for that, then merely to pay the poor devils for the entertainment they give us — let us try to see as they see, feel as they feel, become naked as they are naked to the bitter chill of cowardice, of temptation, of God knows what indeed that strikes them to the bone.

Let us try, and coming to these two, let it for Audrey at least be excused that she was the gentlest thing and all unschooled in any heavier book of life than the airy pamphlet that begins "I love;" with "I love" continues; with "I love" ends; and never asks, much less supplies, what "I love" means, or what demands, or whither leads, or how is paid.



CHAPTER II

LOVE LEADS AN EXPEDITION INTO THE UNFORESEEN

I

HE married her — and wearied of her. Within two months of when he called her wife — and pressed her to him and kissed her for the fondness of that name, and chaffed her with "Wife" in place of Audrey at every lightest word — within two months of that tremendous day he was discovering himself checked and irritated by the vexations, the hindrances, the deceptions imposed by secret marriage upon his former free and buoyant way of life. Within three he was openly irked, not hiding from her that his temper was crossed when, stronger and more frequently, incidents arose to cross it. Within four months — and still their secret undeclared — he was often neglecting her, often silent in her presence for long periods; brooding; frowning at her where she sat or where she walked beside him; leaving her in a storm; returning to her in remorse; assuring himself he did not love her less, nay, rather loved her more — *But* . . . ! Every way he turned and everything she did and all the things she did not do, brought him and bruised him against the bars of which that *But* was made.

All this most wretched and most pitiful, most excusable and most inexcusable business may best be examined in the incidents that stood out to mark its prog-

ress. Theirs was the oldest and most frequent of human errors. They had jumped into the delights of the foreseen, and behold! they found themselves in the swamp, in the jungle, in the desert, in the whirlpool of the unforeseen.

II

Audrey wrote and told Sister Maggie — a letter pledging her to secrecy, posted on the very moment of departure for the Continent ("at our wedding breakfast at the Charing Cross hotel, darling; and the train just going") and breathing ecstasy of happiness, and breathing love all atremble in its prayer for forgiveness. It informed Maggie that they were to be Mr. and Mrs. Redpath until everybody was told; and "O, darling Maggie, I shall not sleep until I get your letter — *Poste restante*, Paris, dear — telling me you forgive me and how glad you are."

Forgiveness was not to be discovered in the reply by the weeping eyes that read it. "You have made a most terrible mistake," Maggie wrote. "You say that you are happy, but you will find you can only be miserable while you are living in deception."

The wounding sentences were written in a firm, clear penmanship that in itself was cold and bitter reprimand. As they appeared, so Audrey read them. She did not know that they were written while the hand that made them could be steadied from its trembling desire to send a message only of devotion, only of prayer for Audrey's happiness, only of blessing. The letter brought to Audrey's eyes the tears that Maggie hoped to bring but ached to bring — forcing herself to be cruel in order to be kind; also it brought belief that Maggie was and

wished to be estranged. It was never answered. Wisely intended, unwisely executed, misread, it added to the record of human perversity another of those immensely pitiful blunders that solely and alone are the cause of human unhappiness. When Heaven holds its reassembly, Heaven, as we seek out our loved, will surely ring with broken, loving greetings of: "I did not know! I did not understand!" No more will need be said. All tragedy, all sorrow is in those words; all tragedy, all sorrow removed by them.

Roly also had his letter. "If you cause her one single moment's unhappiness —" and other wild words. He did not show it to Audrey. Cause his darling unhappiness! He kissed away the tears her own letter had brought and laughingly cheered her with an amusing account of an incident in the hotel lobby. "We'll have to get out of this place, Audrey. There's a man staying here and his wife that I know well. Great pals of Gran's. I near as a toucher ran bang into them."

It was the first glimpse of the Unforeseen.

III

The first glimpse of the Unforeseen! At the moment neither recognised it for such. At the moment it was merely "A dickens of a squeak. I say, we'll have to look out for that kind of thing, old girl." Later, and that before very long, incidents of the kind began to be realised as the Unforeseen indeed. "That kind of thing" became, or seemed to become, extraordinarily and exasperatingly frequent. What had promised to be the fun of looking out for it became the strain of avoiding it.

There came a day — in Vienna, an original item of

their programme but reached much earlier than intended owing to "That kind of thing's" persistence — there came a day when signs of the strain were suddenly evidenced, when, like a disturbed snake, unsuspected and sharply alarming, the Unforeseen upstarted and hissed at them. Audrey had struck up a pleasant hotel acquaintance, the matter of an hour's chat, but related rather enthusiastically to Roly. At dinner that night she pointed out her friend. "Right at the far end — look! By that statue sort of thing. In pink, with that tall man; d'you see, dear?"

He saw; and with concern she saw him set down the glass he was raising to his lips and saw his face darken. He said: "Damnation! It's Lady Ashington. It's maddening, this kind of thing. By God, it is. I'm going. She'll spot me in a minute. I'm going."

His violent words hurt her and frightened her. He got to his feet and she made to rise also. That worsened the incident. "Stop where you are," he said angrily. "Both of us getting up — making people look! I can slip out behind here. Damn this business!"

When she followed him to their room, she found his temper no better that he had gone without his dinner. He had made arrangements, he told her, for them to leave early in the morning, and he named their destination. She tried to pretend not to notice his mood; but her voice trembled a little as she said, "I've never heard of the place, dear."

He grunted, a little ashamed of himself: "I don't suppose anybody has. I hope not. We must get off the beaten track. Badgered about like this from pillar to post. It's getting on my nerves."

She faltered, "I'm so sorry, Roly."

Her tone pricked him. But these men hate above all

things to feel in the wrong when they are in the wrong. The effect of her humility was to make him explain: "I don't know what possessed you, Audrey, 'pon my soul I don't, to go palling up with that woman."

Again she blundered. His reproach was so absurd that she laughed quite naturally at it: "O Roly! how ridiculous! How was I to know you knew her?"

He turned on her, alarming her utterly. "You ought to have known!"

Foolish, exasperating tears in her eyes: "How could I? How could I?"

"I've told you — I've warned you; that's what I mean. I've told you that every dashed soul I ever knew seems to be all over the Continent. I've warned you to be careful. Asked you not to get in with people. You absolutely don't care, seems to me. Perhaps you think it funny dodging about like this — perhaps you enjoy it. Well, I don't. That's enough. Let's drop the subject."

IV

So and in this wise the miserable business jolted towards its climax; deeper blunders at every step and every blunder additional to the load that stumbled them into the next. Here was a young man that had taken to himself pleasures, and lo! they were chains, rattling whensoever he moved most grimly to remind him that now limits were imposed upon his movements; that he who, by virtue of his rank, of the blood in his veins, of his own high, careless, fearless air, that he who by virtue of these was wont to look every man in the face more boldly than the most of us, must now hide, dodge, shift, dissemble, or betray the secret that, as to

his torment he found, every day and every covering deception made more impossible to discover to the world.

Of all mankind's infirmities nothing than deception so quickly, so deeply and so surely turns the quality of his behaviour; nothing so cruelly tears, so acidly pierces his nerves; nothing so saps his resolution, destroys his moral fibre. Honesty is sword and armour, bread and wine; deception a voracious canker in the vitals, a clutch out of hell dragging through fog of fear, through slough of sin, into mire unspeakable. He was in its torments, he was writhing from them into deeper blunders; he began to shudder at the thought of proclaiming his marriage — yet.

She saw his plight and, all unschooled in life, she contributed to the disaster. Here was the gentlest creature, adoring and mated with an impetuous mate that now was as a free beast trapped, goaded by the sudden bars that caged him on every side, wildly seeking an outlet, panicked at finding none. She searched her miserable pamphlet of "I love," stained now with tears. It had nothing to give her. She read into it that in marrying her Roly she thought to have brought him nectar, and lo! it was a cup of poison she had given him, tormenting him utterly. She blamed herself. Through wakeful nights she watched him where he lay beside her — troubled often now in his sleep — and sought and sought, fumbling her pamphlet, to know what amends she could make him; and chid herself she was a burden to him; and would sit up in the darkness and wring her poor young hands in her distracted grief.

He noted the results that these distresses of her mind introduced to her appearance and her behaviour. They did not aid the difficulties with which he found himself

beset. This was the beginning of the period of neglect of her; of silence in her presence for long periods; of brooding; of frowning at her where she sat or when she walked beside him; of leaving her in a storm, returning in remorse; of assuring himself he did not love her less, nay, rather loved her more — *But!*

V

At the end of August came their return to England, and immediately his full realisation of the ghastly delusion of the idea that it were easy to tell Gran — easy and kind — when the thing was done. Monstrous delusion, ghastly folly! Why, the very fates were arrayed against it. He returned to find Gran ailing, in bed. He went to the Mount Street house, bracing his warped resolution to the pitch of telling her, and it was to her bedroom he must go, and found her weak and stretching out her arms to him and overjoyed — O God! so overjoyed! — to have her Roly back. How tell her? Agony enough that she had no reproach for his neglect of her through the summer, nor any that he was come now with the news that he had run his leave to the last day and must at once rejoin the regiment at Canterbury. Agony enough that she nothing reproached, nothing questioned; unthinkable the agony of watching her while he said, "Gran — Gran, dear, I'm married. Audrey, Audrey Oxford, you know," and of hearing her poor lips falter, "Married? Married, Roly? Audrey Oxford? Married, Roly?"

Unthinkable! Impossible!

But it was another blunder committed, another step deeper into the coils, and he knew it for that when he left her, and ranged it with the similar torments that

possessed him: the mad initial folly; the blunder of not proclaiming the marriage immediately he was married; the blunder of each hour delayed during the weeks on the Continent.

Now he was in the very jungle of the Unforeseen. Each step, every day, lost him deeper in its fastnesses; and like one so lost indeed, its dangers — encountered or suspected on every hand — preyed upon his mind, robbed his remaining courage, lost him his moral bearings that remained unwarped. His regimental duties kept him at Canterbury. He could not have Audrey there. He took a tiny furnished flat in the neighbourhood of Knightsbridge and there installed her, and there ran up to see her as often as might be. And the inevitable began. The inevitable — the chaff of his companions as to why he was forever "dodging up to town"; the meetings with his friends and their "Roly, where the devil do you get to these days?" the discovery that not only his men friends but his larger circle of acquaintances — Gran's friends — were beginning to gossip of his mysterious habits. The former put a man's interpretation on his conduct, baited him that they would track him down "to see what she was like." That thrice infuriated him: on Audrey's account; on the fear that they might do it and disclosure be forced, to relieve her from the horrible thing; and on the fact that what was implied was detestable to his nature. The larger circle of his friends were not more charitable, if more discreet. Gran, who was better again and had gone for her health to Burdon Old Manor, sent letters that failed to hide concern telling him of this, that and the other friend who had written saying he denied himself to everybody, was frequently in town, but never available and never to be found. Gran "hoped nothing was

wrong, dear;" but erased her suspicion with her pen, but not so well that he could not read the words and picture the troubled thoughts that wrote them.

Ah! this was that grisly Unforeseen in shape new and most monstrous. How meet it? How meet it? Just as he had shrunk from announcing his intention of marriage because of the clatter of tongues and the opposition that it would loose upon him, so now, but a thousand, thousand times more, he shrank from the clatter that divulgement of his secret would cause; from the resentment of his world at its befoolment by him (as they would feel it); from the sneers and laughter at his turpitude; from the apologies with which he must go round on his knees to those he had deceived; from the interminable explanations he must make. The Unforeseen in shape most monstrous! It rushed him as a host of savage beasts that had snarled, that had threatened, that had come at him singly and torn him but been whipped, but that now was on him in the pack. How meet it? How meet it? God! What a lightsome, harmless, innocent, mad, wanton, reckless thing he had done, and what a turmoil he had loosed!

Bitter days, these, in the Knightsbridge flat. That pamphlet of "I love" all connoted now, written in tears, with what "I love" demands, where leads and must be paid.



CHAPTER III

A LOVERS' LITANY

I

BITTER days — but suddenly breaking to dawn. There came to him, on the rack of this torment, a thought that tortured him anew, yet made for healing. Audrey? Even if, as in his extremity he debated, he dared all and defied all — snatched himself out of this hell by publishing his position and crying to all concerned, "Now do and say your worst!" — even if he so made an end of it, to what would he bring her? How would she be received, suddenly proclaimed his wife when this ugly crop of suspicion and gossip was at its height? He knew, or through his distraught imagination he believed he knew; and he writhed to picture her — his gentle, unversed Audrey — thus introduced to the suspicious, uncharitable, malicious atmosphere that well he was aware his world could breathe. "Comes from a post-office somewhere, or a shop was it? Married at such and such a date — *so he says!*"

Thus the gate was slammed anew upon his resolution and locked and double-locked: the way must somehow be prepared for Audrey, the gossip by some means made to die, before he declared her. And with that there was unlocked and opened wide the gate that had barred up his love. Imagining the world's treatment of her, he realised his own.

It was in the tumult of these discoveries that he presented himself at the Knightsbridge flat and greeted his Audrey with a fondness that made her cry a little for happiness; she frequently cried in these days, not often for happiness. His fondness continued at that dear level through the evening. It emboldened her to urge again the step that she believed the best of all the many plans she ceaselessly revolved for curing the trouble she told herself she had brought upon him. She urged him to tell Gran. "Do tell her, dear. It will end all your worry. You're so worried, Roly. I see it — oh, how I see it! And I only add to it because I'm not — because I don't — because I vex you in so many ways. I know I do. You used to be so happy. You will be again directly this is all over. Do tell her, Roly! Roly, *do!*"

She had been seated on the floor, her head resting against him where he sat in a great armchair. Now, in this appeal of hers, she was turned about and on her knees, her hands enfondling his, her face lifted towards him.

He made a little choking sound, all his love for her surging; all his treatment of her wounding him; the thought of what he would bring her to if he took the course she urged filling him with remorse and with pity for her. He said in a strangled voice: "I can't; I can't," and stooping, he raised her to him so that they lay together in the big chair, their faces close, his arms about her. . . .

For a little space, except that she was crying softly, they were silent — clasped thus, most dear to one another; and then proclaimed that dearness in scraps of murmured sentences, the gaps filled up by what their tones and their clasped arms instructed them. . . .

Just murmurs, and dusky evening in the room — light, faint as their tones were faint, and in the shadows (how else seemed the air they breathed at every breath to thrill them?) spirits of true lovers that were winged down as, let us believe, lovers' spirits may when mortals love.

Just murmurs.

He said: "Audrey, Audrey, I've been so cruel — angry — thoughtless."

And she: "No . . . no."

And she again: "Go to her, then, Roly. Don't tell, if you think not. . . . Just be with her for a little. . . . You'll be happy then. . . . Leave me alone a little, dear. . . . Not even write."

And he: "Audrey! . . . Audrey!"

Her voice: "I shall be happy . . . if only you are happy . . ."

And his: "I have been mad . . . mad to treat you so. . . . Forgive. . . . Forgive."

Her voice — and close, close, all those lovers' spirits to hear this lovers' litany: "When you are happy . . . I am happy."

And his — and all these murmurs chorused from lover's wraith to lover's wraith, as watchers handing flame from hand to hand to instruct heaven love still is here: "Audrey! . . . Audrey!"

And she: "My dear . . . my dear!"

II

Happy for her, happy for him, for all that have a smile and tear for true love, to remember that from that moment never a hasty word or thought passed between them. In that lovers' litany all such were purged, the past wiped out as if it had never been. And, as if in

reward, into the night that surrounded Roly came a ray like a miraculous rope thrown to one in a pit.

The way must somehow be prepared for Audrey, he had said; the gossip somehow be made to die before he could declare her.

Sir Wryford Sheringham supplied the way.

General Sir Wryford Sheringham had been his father's close friend, was Gran's much-trusted nephew and her adviser in Roly's training. Gran was sending him appealing letters in these days, imploring him to find out what it was that was wrong with her dear Roly. Chance enabled him suddenly to reply that, on the eve of his return to India, he was now returning to take command of the Frontier Expedition that the government of India had been saving up for a long time against three Border tribes, and that he purposed taking Roly with him. He could invent a corner to shove the boy into, he wrote; and she must not break her heart nor shed a single tear except for joy that the chance had come to get the boy away and to work. "Whatever it is he's been up to," Sir Wryford wrote, "this'll pull him out of it and send him back to you his father's son again."

They walked into this last and supreme blunder as blindly as they had gone into the first. Roly presented it as the opportunity more wonderful than any that he could have invented to give this gossiping the slip. When he returned ("loaded with medals, old girl," as, aflame with excitement, he told her) it would all be forgotten; open arms for him and open arms for her.

Audrey's contribution to the folly was as characteristic. The news struck her like a blow; but instantly with the shock came its anodyne. He planned for her; every word of his rushing, thoughtless words was drafted to scale of "Because I love you so;" though they had

been actual knives she would gladly have clasped such to her heart.

Credit him that the night before the day on which he sailed he had a sudden realisation of his madness. Credit him, at least, that now for the first time in their misguided chapter, he saw a blunder before he was irrevocably in it, and seeing it, tried to halt. He realised. He told her it was impossible that he should leave her thus. He must leave her in her right place. He must leave her with Gran. Gran was in town to bid him good-by. He must — he would tell her that very night of their marriage: in the morning take Audrey to her.

But at that she broke down utterly — betraying for the first time the flood and tempest of her agony at losing him and, while he strove to soothe her, imploring him not to put upon her this last trial of her strength. "I couldn't bear it, Roly!" she sobbed. "Roly, I couldn't bear it!" Overwrought by the cumulative effects of the past months, culminating in the sleepless agony of this last week and now in the unendurable torture of good-by, she became hysterical at his proposal; sobbed as if her reason were gone, shaking with dreadful spasms of emotion that terrified him lest she would be unable to retake her breath. His arms about her, and his loving pleadings, his earnest promises to withdraw what he had said, joined with the sheer weariness of her convulsive distress at last to relieve her. She passed into a still, exhausted state and thence — utterly alarming him by her deathly pallor and by the faintness of her voice — into imploring him in whispers into the last, worst folly of all their pitiable blunders. She could not be left, she implored him, with Gran — left alone with her, left in such circumstances. "No, no! Roly, no!

Together, Roly; not alone, not alone!" And then she began to assure him of her happiness if she might just wait here. "You can always think of me and imagine me here: just waiting for you, and thinking of you and praying for you; and not lonely, not unhappy. I *promise* not lonely; I promise, *promise* not unhappy! You can't think of me like that if you leave me with Lady Burdon. You don't know *what* may happen to me; how she may feel towards me or what I might imagine she felt and what I might not do. I *could* not — I *could* not!"

Try to understand him that he suffered himself to be convinced against himself. So placed; so implored; so loved and so loving; so shackled by the train of blunders he had committed, a hundred times more wise, more strong a man than twelfth Baron Burdon would have given way as he gave way. This was their farewell, and not to rob its fleeting hours more he agreed, and turned with her to rehearse the plans for her comfort in his absence. The flat was taken for six months ahead. "Back in four! Now I bet you any money I'm back in four!" There was money banked for her. Finally he wrote and gave her two letters, one addressed to a Mr. Pemberton — "One of the best, old Pemberton" — the other to Gran. He began to say, "If anything happens to me," but went on: "If ever you get — you know — down on your luck — that kind of thing — or feel you'd like to make it known about us before I come back, just send those letters — just as they are; you needn't write or take them yourself. They explain everything, they . . . oh, don't cry. . . . Audrey . . . Audrey!"

Within a few hours he was gone. Within four months they were building a cairn of stones above him to keep the jackals from his body.



CHAPTER IV

WHAT THE TOOO-FIRTY WINNER BROUGHT MRS. ERPS

I

COME to her in the month of January. Bridge those long weeks wherein she lived from mail day to mail day — as one not strong that has a weary mile to cover and walks from seat to seat — and come to her there.

She was at this time not in good health, suffered much from headaches and was oppressed with a constant fatigue. In this condition fresh air without exertion had become very desirable to her, and she formed the daily habit of long rides outside the leisurely horsed tramcars of those days. Study of a guide acquainted her with their routes. She had a particular one for each day of the week, counting from Saturday to Friday, and arranged on a little plan by which (as she made believe) each journey was part of a long journey whose end was Friday's ride, whence she returned home to find the Indian mail. Not only fresh air was obtained by this means, but a sense of actively advancing towards the day that brought the letters, round which she lived.

On an afternoon of this January her ride was from Holborn, through Islington and Holloway, to Highgate Archway. On the near side of the Holloway road, half a mile perhaps below the stopping place, there is a group of houses approached by shallow steps that have resisted the overpowering inclination of the district to become shops and instead support their tenants by pro-



viding apartments. The car that carried her had stopped here. She had learnt to eke out the amusement of these rides by attention to all manner of little incidents, and — employed with one such — was wondering if her car would restart before it was reached by a newsboy who ran towards them from the distance, his pink contents-bill fluttering apronwise before him. Some one was a terribly long time over the business of alighting or entering. The newsboy won. A few yards from where she sat above him he stopped to sell a paper and to fumble for change. The halt caused his fluttering pink apron to come to rest.

PEER
KILLED IN
FRONTIER
FIGHTING

Had something actually struck her throat? Was a hand actually strangling there? Could they see she was fighting for breath? Was the car really rocking — right up so she could not see the street, right down and all the street circling? Could others hear that shrill and enormous din that threatened to split her brain?

Through the tremendous hubbub and the dizzy rocking she got down. If this strangle at her throat did not relax, if this dizzy whirling did not cease, this immense din silence. . . .

A curious voice, leagues away, said: "Yer've got ter pye fer it, y'know."

She put her fingers in her purse and held out what she could gather. A figure that had been going up and down in front of her seemed to take a tremendous sidelong sweep and vanished. She was left with a paper in her

hands and knew what she must do. But if this din, this giddy circling. . . .

It suddenly stopped. Everything stopped. There was not a sound, there was not a movement.

II

London stands stock still in the middle of a windy, crowded pavement to open its evening paper and to peer at the stop-press space for only one particular purpose. While she thus stood and peered (and suddenly knew this icy silence was the gathering of an immense tide that was coming — coming) a woman who wore an apron over a capitally developed figure, and a rakish cloth cap over a headful of curl papers, opened the door of the house immediately beside her (appearing with the air of one shot at immense velocity out of a trap) and called "I! Piper!" She then exclaimed nearly as loudly "Ennoyin'!" and then saw Audrey.

This lady's name was Mrs. Erps, and she knew perfectly well, and rejoiced to observe an example of, the peculiarity in regard to London's evening paper that has been noted above. Mrs. Erps rolled her solid hands in her apron and came down ingratiatingly. A model of correctness. "Excoose me, my dear," she began, "Excoose me, wot 'orse won the tooo-firty? My old man — Ho, thenks, I'm sure — Ho, gryshus!"

Relating the incident later in the evening to a lady friend, and acting it with considerable dramatic power: "'Ands me the piper she does," said Mrs. Erps, "as natural as I 'ands this apring to you and then looks at me jus' as if I mightn't had been there, and then she says in a whissiper 'Oh, dear!' she says. 'O Gawd!' and *dahn* she goes plump — dahn like that!" explained

Mrs. Erps from the floor, very nearly carrying her friend with her in the stress of dramatic illustration.

But Mrs. Erps was more than a great tragedy actress; she was also a kindly soul and there is to be added to this quality the genial warmth aroused in her by the fact that the tooo-firty winner was Lollipop, that Lollipop had cantered home at what she called sevings, and that her old man was seving times arf a dollar the richer for the performance. "Carry 'er in there," said Mrs. Erps in a very loud voice to a policeman in particular and to a considerable area of the street in general. "Young man, that's my 'ouse, and Mrs. Elbert Erps my nime, and dahn in front of it the pore young thing's fell jus' as she was 'anding me this very piper wot 'ad come aht to see the tooo-firty winner. 'Excoose me,' I says to 'er, ' excoose me —'"

The policeman: "All right, mother. Now, then, you boys."

Mrs. Elbert Erps, going backwards up the steps, hands beneath the arms of that poor stricken creature: "There's a cleeng, sweet bed in my first front, well-haired and wool blenkits, that lets eight and six and find yer own, and could ask ten, and there she'll rest, the poor pretty thing, dropped on me very doorstep, as yer might say, and standin' there with the piper same as you might. 'Excoose me,' I says to 'er, 'excoose me —'"

Mrs. Erps shot open her front door with a backward plunge of her foot, the policeman closed it with a backward kick of his foot; and to the continued recital in great detail of how it all happened, their burden was carried to the first front and laid upon the cleeng, sweet bed, well-haired, wool blenkits, eight and six and find yer own.

They loosened her dress at her throat; beneath the

constable's direction made use of water and chafed her hands. "Marrit," said Mrs. Erps, denoting the wedding ring. "Marrit, she is."

Presently Audrey opened her eyes.

"Why, *there* you are!" cried Mrs. Erps in high delight. "There you are, my pretty. Safe and sahnd as ever you was. There you are! You recolleck me, don't you, my love? Wot you gave the piper to? 'Excoose me,' I says to yer, 'excoose me,' I says —"

Audrey's eyes went meaninglessly from Mrs. Erps to the constable, her eyelids fluttered above them and closed.

"*Stand* aht of it!" said Mrs. Erps to the constable in a very sharp whisper. "*Stand* aht of it, frightenin' her. 'E won't 'urt you, my pretty. 'E only carried of yer up. *Dahn* you went, yer know, right dahn. Where's your 'usbing, my pretty?"

Her lips just parted. She moaned "Oh, dear! O God!"

Mrs. Erps communicated to the constable: "Jus' 'er very words. *Dahn* she went —"

The eyes opened again.

"Your 'usbing, dear, I'm askin'. 'Usbing. Ain't you got a ma, my dear? Ain't you got a pa?"

She said: "Dead . . . dead . . . Oh, dear . . ."

"Orfing," communicated Mrs. Erps.

"Rambling in her mind," said the constable. "Not answering you, she wasn't."

"You pop off, young man," commanded Mrs. Erps with sudden hostility. "Ramberling! Didn't I ask her, and didn't she give answer back to me? Ramberling! You pop off. I'll fine where she lives, and my old man 'll come to the station if so need be. 'E ain't afraid of yer, so don't you think it. Served on a joory,

he has, before now. Ramberling! I'm going to rub 'er pore feet. That's what I'm goin' to do. Ramberling! She knows me as spoke 'er fair before ever you came. 'Excoose me,' I says to her, 'excoose me—'"

The policeman, from the door: "Yes, I've heard that."

Mrs. Erps, bending over the stairs: "Pop off! That's what I'm telling you. Pop off!"

III

Mrs. Erps rubbed the "pore feet," put a hot bottle to them, covered the poor, motionless form with two of the wool blenkits, called up her old man when he came in; and in his presence and in that of the lady second floor lodger and the young man first back lodger, trembling with witnessed honesty, she opened the pretty dear's purse and searched her pocket for any clue to her home. There was none. Mrs. Erps, having counted the money in the purse, written down the amount and had the paper signed by her old man, by second floor and by first back, bade them pop off, and sat beside her patient with soothing words and frequently a kiss to the reiterated "Oh, dear . . . oh, dear . . . O God!" that came in scarcely audible sighs as from one numbed with pain and utterly tired.

So, only now and then sighing, eyes closed, she lay for close upon three hours. Mrs. Erps stole away to cook up a nice bit of fried fish for 'er old man, revisiting the first front at intervals, waiting to hear that weary moan, and returning down-stairs increasingly troubled with: "I don't like to hear her. Fair wrings my 'art, it does."

A visit paid towards seven o'clock was better re-

warded. Audrey opened her eyes, looked full and intelligently at Mrs. Erps, standing there with a lighted candle, and quite naturally addressed her. She questioned nothing. She seemed fully to understand where she was and why. In tones weak but quite clear and collected she made two requests. Please let her stay here for the night and leave her quite alone; she wanted nothing, just to be alone; and please send a telegram for her.

She dictated the message and it was sent — to Maggie, and with Mrs. Erps' address added, and running: "Please come at once. He is dead. Audrey."

IV

Miss Oxford arrived in the early afternoon of the next day. All the devotion of the years she had mothered Audrey, all the longing — longing — longing of the past months for news, all the agony of suspense in the train journey (the papers informing her as they informed new Lady Burdon at Miller's Field), all a breaking heart's distress was in the little cry she gave when she entered first front and saw that strangely white, strangely impassive face lying on the pillow.

"My darling! Oh, my darling" — arms about the still form, tears raining down.

No responsive movement; just "Dear Maggie — dear Maggie."

"Why did you never write?"

"Dear Maggie . . ."

There was no more of explanation between them.

"Maggie, I want to be quite, quite still. Not to talk, Maggie darling. Just hold my hand and let me lie here. Are you holding it?"

"Audrey! Audrey! Yes — yes. In both mine."

"I don't feel you."

She seemed to feel nothing, to want nothing, and, though she lay now with wide eyes, to see nothing. She just lay, scarcely seeming to breathe. Once she said, in a very fond voice, "Yes, Roly," as if she were in conversation with him. No other sound.

After a long time Maggie told her: "Darling, I'm going to bring a doctor to see you."

No reply nor movement when Maggie released the hand she held and left the room to seek Mrs. Erps. No interest nor response when the doctor came, or while he examined her. He took Maggie aside. "She's very young. How long has she been married?"

"In June — the first of June."

They spoke in whispers. When he was going, he repeated what he had most impressed. "No fear of it happening so far as I can see. She doesn't seem in pain. That numbness? Mental. Her mind is too occupied. I don't think movement would bring it on; but don't move her yet. We mustn't run risks. It would be fatal — almost certainly fatal if it happened. Another shock would do it; nothing else, I think. Well, there's no likelihood of shock, is there? You can guard against that. See to that and you've no need to worry. She couldn't possibly live through it in her present state. Otherwise — why, we'll soon be on the right road and getting strong for it. I'll look in to-night."

This was in the passage, and with Mrs. Erps in waiting at the front door rehearsing in her mind: "As I was telling you when you come, doctor, 'Excoose me,' I says to 'er, 'excoose me —'" But what Mrs. Erps overheard caused her to let him escape and to say instead

to Miss Oxford, "Oh, the pore love! If any one makes a sahnd to shock 'er — not if I knows it, they don't."

Mrs. Erps knew quite well the meaning of that recurrent "it" in the doctor's words.

V

But it was not in Mrs. Erps's power to prevent the shock that came.

It came in direct train of action from that "Yes, Roly" that Maggie had heard, separated from it by the days of high fever, the mind wandering, that almost immediately supervened. As one that falls asleep upon a resolution and wakes at once to remember it and to act upon it, so, the fever releasing her to her senses, Audrey took up immediately that which lay in those words of hers.

She had fallen into a natural sleep that promised the end of her fever. She awoke, and directly she awoke sat up in bed. She was alone. Only the one thought was in her mind; she got up and began to dress.

The resolution of her mind governed the extreme weakness of her body. She was no more aware of her feebleness than one strung up in battle notices a wound not immediately crippling. She knew exactly what she must do. She found her purse on the mantelpiece and took it and left the house without being noticed — or thinking to escape or to give notice. Only that one thought occupied her; a few yards down the street she met a cab and hailed it. "Burdon House, Mount Street," she directed the driver.

"Yes, Roly," had been when Roly, visiting her more clearly, more real than any other figure about her during that numb and impassive period when she desired to be

quiet in order to talk with him, had told her to go to Gran, to comfort Gran, and to be comforted.

VI

Old butler Noble admitted her. Events had caused old butler Noble to be considerably shaken in his wits. A week ago the door would have been closed to a young woman who asked for Lady Burdon and refused her name. To-day, on the explanation, "The name does not matter. Lady Burdon will be glad to see me," it was held open and the visitor taken to the library.

This was the second day of new Lord and Lady Burdon's visit for the latter to make Jane Lady Burdon's acquaintance. Only that morning old butler Noble had made the mistake of turning away a Miller's Field friend who had called to see new Lady Burdon, carrying out a promise to report how baby Rollo, left behind, was getting on. "Her ladyship is seeing no one," Noble had informed her. The excellent Miller's Field friend had been too overawed by his manner to explain exactly whom it was she wished to see. She sent a note of explanation by messenger. Noble delivered it to his mistress, who read it and sent him with it to new Lady Burdon. The note was foolishly worded. New Lady Burdon, ill at ease in this house, crimsoned to think it had been read. From the outset, hostile and prepared for hostility, she had taken a sharp dislike to this old man-servant; angry and mortified, she questioned him and spoke to him as he was unaccustomed to be addressed.

It was beneath the lesson of this incident that he admitted Audrey without question. She was none of his mistress's friends. In the first place he knew all

such; in the second they did not call at the impossible hour of half-past six in the evening, nor present the strange appearance — white, not very steady, faltering in voice — that she bore.

He took the news of her arrival to new Lady Burdon.

"Gave no name, do you say?"

"She said your ladyship would be glad to see her."

Lady Burdon hesitated a moment. She tingled with fresh hostility against this man because she wondered whether he expected her to accept that statement or to send him again for the name. She did not know and hated him the more, and hated all the fancied resentment for which he stood, because she did not know.

Her mind sought a way out. She said with a little laugh: "Oh, I think I know. Very well."

She went to the library.

CHAPTER V

WHAT AUDREY BROUGHT LADY BURDON

I

It was very dim in the library. Above the centre of the room light stood in soft points upon a high chandelier. A fire burnt low within the shelter of the great hearth. The rest was shadow.

Lady Burdon came easily into the room, but in the doorway stopped; and Audrey, who had made a forward movement, prepared words on her lips, also stopped. There was something odd about this girl who stood there, Lady Burdon thought, and her mind ran questing the cause of some strange apprehension that somehow was communicated to it. There was something wrong, Audrey thought; and she began to tremble. For a briefest space, that was a world's space to Audrey's mind bewildered and to Lady Burdon's mind suspicious, as they went hunting through it, these two stood thus, and thus regarded one another.

It was told of this library at Burdon House — Mr. Amber's "Lives" record it — that in the days when gentlemen wore swords against their thighs, a duel was fought here, that the thing went in three fierce assaults, each ended by a bloody thrust on this side or on that, and that between the bouts the rivals panted, sick with fatigue and hurt.

Words for swords, and the first bout: —

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Lady Burdon closed the door. She went a step towards Audrey and said, "Yes?"

Audrey, with fumbling hands, swaying a little where she stood: "I think — I came to see Lady Burdon."

Odd her look, and odd her tone, and strange the trembling that visibly possessed her. Lady Burdon was about to explain. Her mind came back from its questing like one that cries alarm by night through silent streets. "Beware!" it cried to her. "Beware!" and for her explanation she substituted:

"I am Lady Burdon."

The first thrust.

Audrey put a hand against a chair that stood beside her. The trembling that had taken her when, expecting to see Roly's Gran, this stranger had appeared, began to shake her terribly in all her frame. This Lady Burdon? For the first time since her will had got her from her bed and brought her here, she was informed how weak she was. A dreadful physical sickness came over her and all the room became unsteady.

Respite enough, and the second bout:—

Lady Burdon demanded: "Who are you, please?"

No reply, and that augmented her suspicion, and she came on again: "Who are you, please?"

Wave upon wave that dreadful sickness swept over Audrey and set her brain aswim. Bewildered thoughts, like frantic arms of one that drowns, tossed up upon the flood, and like such arms that gesticulate and vanish, spun there a dizzy moment and spun away: This Lady Burdon? . . . then this not Roly's house . . . then what? . . . then where? This Lady Burdon? . . . then all her life with Roly was dream . . . had never been . . . none of her life had ever been . . . what had been then?

A third time: "Who are you, please? Why do you not answer me?"

She made an effort. She said very pitiably: "Oh, how — oh, how can you be Lady Burdon?"

No wound — only the merest scratch, but increasing in Lady Burdon the dis-ease that had come to her on entering the room and had heightened at every moment.

In her turn it was hers to give pause, but she engaged quickly for the third bout.

"I see you do not understand," she said.

And Audrey: "Oh, please forgive me. No, I do not understand; I have been ill. I am ill."

"But I am afraid I do not understand you. I do not understand your manner. If you will tell me who you are — what it is you want — I can perhaps explain."

But Audrey only looked at her. Only most pitiable inquiry was in her eyes. Lady Burdon read their inquiry, that same "Oh, how can you be Lady Burdon?" and the question and the silence brought vague, unreasoning alarm in violent collision with her suspicions. Anger was struck out of their conjunction. She said sharply:

"You must answer me, please. You must answer me. What is the matter? I am asking you who you are."

Mr. Amber's account of the duel says that one contestant drove the other the length of the room and had him pinned against the wall: —

Into Audrey's bewilderment, the dreadful sickness and the trembling she could not control, these sharp demands came like numbing blows upon one in the trough of the sea grappling for life. When Roly had come to her as she lay stupefied and she had answered him "Yes, Roly," he had told her clearly as if in fact he had stood

beside her, what she should say to Gran. She had come with the words prepared. They suddenly returned to her now.

The words she had made ready: "I am Audrey —" she said.

Mr. Amber's account of the duel says that the one contestant, having his rival pinned, was too impetuous and ran upon the other's sword: —

Lady Burdon said: "Audrey? Do you say Audrey? Are you known here?"

And ran upon the other's sword: —

"I am Audrey — I am Roly's wife."

II

As a dreadful blow sends the stricken, hands to face, staggering this way and that on nerveless, aimless legs; or as a tipsy man, unbalanced by fresh air, will blunder into any open door, so, at that "I am Audrey — I am Roly's wife" — Lady Burdon's mind was sent reeling, fumbling through a maze of spinning scenes — marriage? and what then? — before it could fix itself to realisation.

She stood plucking with one hand at the fingers of the other; and when the whirl subsided and she came dizzily out of it her mind was leaden and the first words she could get from it were none she wanted.

Her voice all thick: "He was not married," she said.

The reply, very gentle: "We did not tell any one."

And to that nothing better than "Why?"

"Roly did not wish it."

Thick and heavy still: "Why do you come now?"

And Audrey in a little cry: "Because he is dead!"

Then Lady Burdon said dully: "You had better go,"

and at the bewilderment that came into Audrey's eyes repeated more strongly: "You had better go — quickly;" and then "Quickly!" with her voice run up on the word, and her hands that had been plucking flung apart.

Her mind was over its numbness and through the whirl of nightmare meanings in that "I am Roly's wife;" and it came out of them as one shaken by a fall and strung up for vengeance. Marriage! Impossible! And she a fool to be frightened by it — at worst a horrid aftermath of disgusting conduct.

"Quickly!" she cried and then burst out with: "I see what you are — to come at such a time — to this house of mourning — he scarcely dead — with such a story — wicked — infamous — I know, I see now why you were surprised to see me — an old lady you expected — grief-stricken —"

She stopped, achoke for breath, and Audrey said: "Oh, please — please."

Misgiving, that subtle, coward spy that spies the way for fear, cast its net over Lady Burdon. The pleading, gentle air — no flush of shame, no note of defiance hunted her mind back to its alarms. And Audrey said: "He did not wish our marriage known;" and at "marriage" misgiving turned and shouted fear to follow.

She said slowly: "You persist marriage? There are proofs of marriage. Where are your proofs?"

The pleading look only deepened: "But I never thought —" Audrey said, " — but I never thought —" She swayed, and swayed against the chair she held. It supported her. "I never thought I would not be believed. Lady Burdon will understand. I know she will understand. If I may see her, please . . ."

"If you were married — proofs."

There was a considerable space before Audrey answered. Presently she said very faintly:

"I am very ill . . . I am very ill . . . I can bring proofs. . . . But she will understand. . . . Please let me see her. . . . Please, please . . ."

In advertisement of her state her eyelids fluttered and fell upon her eyes while she spoke. Her voice was scarcely to be heard.

Her condition made no appeal to Lady Burdon. The simplicity of her words, her simple acceptance of the challenge to bring proofs, returned Lady Burdon to that dull plucking at her hands; and presently she turned and went heavily across the room and through the door, closed it behind her and went a few paces down the hall — to what? At that question she stopped, and at the answer her mind gave went quickly back to the door and stood there breathing fast. What was shut in here? A monstrous thing come to strike her down as suddenly as miracle had come to snatch her up? And where had she been going? To publish it? To impel the horrible fate it might have for her? To say to old Lady Burdon and to Maurice: "There is a woman here who says she was married to Lord Burdon?" To say what would spring into their minds as it tore like a wild thing at hers: — "Yes, if marriage, a child . . . an heir?" At thought of how narrowly she had escaped the results of that action, she trembled as one trembles that in darkness has come to the edge of a cliff and by a single further step had plunged to destruction; and at imagination of the bitterness, the humiliation that would be hers if the worst were realised and she returned from what she had become to worse than she had been, she writhed in torture of spirit that was like twisting

poison in her vitals. All her plans, all her dreams, all her sweet foretasting sprang up before her, mocking her; all the intolerable sympathy of her friends, all the secret laughter it would hide, came at her, twisting her.

Somewhere in the house a door opened and shut. She put a hand violently to her throat, as though the shock of the sound were a blow that struck her there. She found herself braced against the door, guarding it; listening for footsteps, and strung up to keep away whoever came. Silence! But the attitude into which she had sprung informed her of the determination that had shaped unperceived beneath the tumult of her thoughts. She was not going to fall beneath the blow that threatened her! When she knew that, she was calmer, and set herself to satisfy her fears. What was shut in here? A wanton. . . . Wanton? Who never flushed, never railed, defied? A betrayed, then. Well, what was that to her, and how was she concerned? A betrayed? Who came with no story of betrayal that might or might not be, but with assertion of marriage that was capable of definite proof or disproof? Marriage? Impossible! A lie! Impossible? There came to her recollection of that strange disappearance of which Mr. Pemberton had told; was marriage the secret of it? There swept back to her that vivid and hideous nightmare on the very night of the news when she had cried "I hold!" and had been answered: "No, you do not — nay, I hold." Was that foreboding? There flamed before her again the mock of her plans, the humiliation of her downfall. She struck her clenched hands together; and as if the violent action caused an assembly of her arguments, she reduced her position to this: either the thing was true, in which case it could be

proved; or it was a lie, in which case no consideration recommended her to do other than keep it to herself and herself stamp upon it.

That satisfied her and she reëntered the room to act upon it.

Audrey was on her knees by the chair. The sight shook her satisfaction. Wanton? Betrayed? A lie?

Audrey turned towards her: "I have been praying," she said. She got to her feet and came forward a step: "She is coming to see me?"

Lady Burdon said: "I have told her. She will not see you."

She was committed. She stood agonisingly strung up in every fibre, as one that waits an appalling catastrophe. She saw Audrey wring her hands and heard her moan "Oh . . . Oh!"

She heard her own voice say: "You can bring your proofs." She had, as it were, a vision of herself opening the street door and watching Audrey pass her and go down the steps and out of sight. She was only actually returned to herself when she found herself, as one awaking who has walked in sleep, striving to make her trembling hands close the latch of the door.

CHAPTER VI

ARRIVAL OF THE HAPPY WARRIOR

I

THE driver of a four-wheeled cab, crawling down Mount Street, pushed along his horse when he saw Audrey walking with very slow and uncertain steps ahead of him. He drew into pace alongside her and began to repeat: "Keb? Keb, miss — keb, — keb?" with a persistence and regularity that suggested it was the normal sound of his breathing.

She stopped and stared at him in a dazed way. He pulled up and went on quite contentedly: "Keb? — Keb, miss — keb, — keb?" His voice and his keb came presently into her realisation. There returned to her knowledge of what she purposed. Her thoughts seemed to her to be drifting shapes, and this one had floated away and she had been trying to reach it — hanging there just above her — while she stared at him. She gave him the address of the Knightsbridge flat and presently was driving there and presently going up the stairs, very slowly, taking her key from her purse, and then entering.

The flat was in extraordinary confusion. She did not notice. The woman who came daily to attend her wants had come twice to find her not returned, and a third time with a gentleman friend (on tiptoe), taking a stealthy and permanent departure an hour later with

everything that could be conveniently carried. The back of a drawer in a bureau had not received this lady's attention. It contained all that Audrey had come to seek: a box of carved wood, picked up on the Continent. Those two letters Roly had given her for Mr. Pemberton and Gran were here. Her mind had turned to them when she had realised the thing that had never occurred to her: that she would not be believed. Here also was her marriage certificate and all the letters Roly had written her — before marriage and from India.

She took up the box and began to retrace her steps. She had scarcely got down the stairs when dizziness seized her again. The dreadful sickness and the trembling that the shock of her first encounter with Lady Burdon had caused her had been stamped out by the final blow that made her wring her hands and cry "Oh . . . oh!" and had sent her numbed from the house and carried her numbed to this point. Her physical senses had been drugged, just as they had been hypnotised by the instruction to which she had answered "Yes, Roly." Now they were suddenly released from the kindness of the drug. Dizziness — and while all things spun about her — pain. It caught her with a violence so immense that she believed her body could not contain it and would go asunder. It drove her, as it seemed to her, through unconsciousness and into a state in which she met it again with a quality in its sharpness that she knew for death, as if she recognised death. It dropped her back from where she had seen death, through the degree of its first immensity, and down to a gnawing that told her it was gathering force to rush up again and this time leave her there — gone. In that respite she got to the cab. She would die at the next onslaught — Maggie! If Maggie could hold her when

it came! She did not know the address in the Holloway Road, but knew it was there, and a butcher's with a strange name — Utter — had caught her attention opposite when she left the house. She tried to tell the driver, but her condition overcame her speech. He saw her state and jumped down to her, and she called tremendously upon herself and effected the words. He more lifted than helped her in, and she continued to hold herself until he got back to his box, then collapsed groaning.

The cabman pulled up opposite the establishment of Mr. Utter and had scarcely stopped his horse when from Mrs. Erps's house came Mrs. Erps, plunging down the steps, and Miss Oxford, who stopped at the entrance, not daring to come on. Mrs. Erps peered through the cab window and then called back to Miss Oxford. "Told yer it was. Safe and sahnd!" and began to tug at the handle and sharply addressed the cabman: "Ho, ain't you got a nasty stiff door!" and cried through the window: "Why, *there* you are, my dear! Popping off like you hadn't ought to, give us a fair ole turn!" and flung open the door and said, "Ho, dear!" and turned a frightened face to Maggie, come beside her.

The open door revealed how Audrey was collapsed, and showed the hue of ashes that her face had, and gave the groaning that came from her.

Miss Oxford went to her. "Audrey! . . . dying! She is dying!"

By common understanding they began to try to carry her out. The cabman leant over from his box and presently saw Mrs. Erps come backing out with violent movements and suddenly had her fist shaken in his surprised face. "'Old your old 'orse, carng yer!" Mrs.

Erps cried furiously. "Joltin' of us! 'Old your old catsmeat, carng yer!" She plunged round to the further door, and through that they lifted her whose groaning terrified them utterly, carried her up-stairs, and for the second time she was laid on the cleeng blenkits, well haired, eight an six and find yer own.

All Mrs. Erps's breath — no policeman to assist her — was this time required for the exertion. But when their burden was laid she voiced the extremity to which it was clearly come. "'Ad er shock, she 'as," said Mrs. Erps. "Some one's done it on 'er."

"Oh, bring the doctor," Miss Oxford cried. "Quick! Quick! Oh, my God . . . my God!"

She did what she could while Mrs. Erps was gone. She was praying, when her prayer was so far answered that Audrey recognised her. "Maggie . . ." and then "I am dying — forgive," and then caught up in her pains again while Maggie cried: "Don't! Don't! It is for you to forgive me; you will be all right soon — very soon." The pains drew off a little. Audrey began to speak very faintly. "I went to Lady Burdon —" Very feebly she told what had happened and Maggie, who had begged her, "Darling, don't talk — don't worry," listened as one that is held aghast. When the slow words failed, she did not at once realise that Audrey's voice had stopped. Mrs. Erps and the doctor found her kneeling by the still form with strangely staring, unweeping eyes.

"She has had a shock," the doctor began.

"They have killed her," Miss Oxford said.

Bending over the patient he did not notice her words nor the intensity of their tone; and there began to come very quickly a dreadful urgency that caused agony of

grief to override the agony of hate that had possessed her.

There was a thin, new cry went up in the room: and that was life newly come. And there was heavy breathing with dreadful pause at each expiration's end and then the straining upward climb: and that was life fluttering to be gone. Longer the pauses grew and harsher the upward breath. Loud the thin cry struck in, and as though it called that fleeting life, and as though that fleeting life, in the act of springing away, turned its head at the sound, Audrey opened her eyes.

There seemed to be a question in them. Miss Oxford bent closely over her: "A boy, my darling."

She seemed to smile before she died.

CHAPTER VII

ENLISTMENT OF THE HAPPY WARRIOR

THAT day of Audrey's death was in two minds at two breakfasts in different quarters of London on a morning some while later. In the Mount Street house Jane Lady Burdon, starting in an hour to make her home with her sister in York, was reading to Lord and Lady Burdon a letter just received from India. It was a sympathetic note from the officer who had been with her Roly when he fell. "'His last words,'" she read aloud with faltering lips, "'were: *Tell Gran to love Audrey.* It was difficult to catch them, but I think that was it.'"

Jane Lady Burdon laid down the letter and smiled feebly. "They have no meaning for me," she said.

And Lord Burdon: "Nellie! What's up, old girl?"

Lady Burdon struggled with the dreadful agitation the words had caused her. They had meaning for her. "*I am Audrey — I am Roly's wife.*"

"So sad," she exclaimed, "so sad — excuse me — I — " She rose shakily and went from the room. After two days of suspense she had thought that hideous alarm defeated and disproved. What now? And what had she done?

The other breakfast was at Mrs. Erps's — also immediately before a journey. "No one," Mrs. Erps had said, "no one hadn't oughter travel on a nempty stomach," and had forced Miss Oxford to the table before the

start for Little Letham and "Post Offic." "I know you've had bitter trouble as loved the pretty dear meself ever since 'Excoose me,' I says to 'er, 'excoose me,' as I've told yer. An' Gord alone knows I know what trouble is, as 'ad twings of me own pop off in one mumf. But you've got the living for to think of. Same as I 'ad my ole man, you've got this blessed ingfang what never know'd a muvver's breast and took to the bottle like nothing I never did see."

And to the blessed "infang" reposing in her arms while she talked: "Didn't yer, yer saucy sossidge? That's what you are, yer know — a saucy sossidge. Ho, yes yer are. No use yer giving answer back ter me, yer know. A saucy, saucy sossidge, wot I should cook up with mashed if I had me way with yer, bless yer."

Maggie scarcely heard; but there was one sentence of Mrs. Erps that joined her thoughts: "You've got the living for to think of." Yes, she had that — and the dead to revenge. "They have killed her," she had cried to the doctor. Through the long night, when she knelt beside the still figure, that thought had burned within her and refused her tears. It grew to an intolerable agony that pressed upon her brain as though a band of steel were there. She understood what had bewildered Audrey — who it had been that had said "I am Lady Burdon." Her imagination pictured the woman. An orgasm of most terrible hate possessed her, increasing that dreadful pressure on her brain, and suddenly something seemed to her to have given way beneath the pressure.

Hate or passion of that degree never filled her again. She was strangely quiet in manner when Mrs. Erps came to her in the morning, strangely quiet at the funeral in Highgate Cemetery while Mrs. Erps wept in loud emo-

tion, and always quite quiet in mind. The child was going to live, she was somehow fully assured of that, and she was not going to give him up — her Audrey's child — as, if she spoke, she might have to give him up. He was going to live with her at "Post Offic" and take his mother's place; and one day. . . . They had taken Audrey from her. One day she would return to them Audrey's son. "I am Lady Burdon" had murdered Audrey. One day, when "I am Lady Burdon" was secure and comfortable in her possessions, and had forgotten Audrey, Audrey's son should avenge his mother. . . .

Nothing could go wrong, Miss Oxford thought. She went through all the proofs in the carved box. Nothing was wanting. One day she would hand them to him — and then!

She wrote to her friend, Miss Purdie, at Little Letham, who had been taking care of "Post Offic" for her and told her — for the village information — that Audrey had lost her husband, and, on the shock, had died, in giving birth to a son. "I have called him Percival — his father's name — Percival Redpath."

"Look arter yerself," cried Mrs. Erps, as the train drew out of Waterloo. "Look arter yerself. Can't not look arter him if yer don't — and 'e 'll want lookin' arter, 'e will. 'E's going ter be a knockaht, that's what 'e's going to be, ain't yer, yer saucy sossidge! Sossidge! Goo'by, sossidge. Goo'by. . . ."

BOOK THREE

BOOK OF THE HAPPY, HAPPY TIME. THE ELEMENT OF YOUTH



BOOK THREE

BOOK OF THE HAPPY, HAPPY TIME. THE ELEMENT OF YOUTH

CHAPTER I

PERCIVAL HAS A PEEP AT THE 'NORMOUS

I

YOUNG Percival was seven — rising eight — when he first saw Burdon Old Manor. Miss Oxford had taken him for a walk, and they were in the direction of the Manor grounds, a locality she commonly avoided, when "There's a cart coming!" he warned her. He had lagged behind, exploring in a dry ditch; and he raced up to her with the news, catching her hand and drawing her to the hedge, for she had been walking in the middle of the road, occupied with her thoughts.

Percival had learnt to be accustomed to long silences in his Aunt Maggie and to rescue her from them when need arose. They were familiar, too, to all the villagers and to the "help" who was now required for the domestic work of "Post Offic." Not the same but a very different Miss Oxford had returned to "Post Offic" seven years ago, bringing the news of poor, pretty Miss Audrey's loss of husband and death, and bringing the little mite that was born orphan, bless him. A very different Miss Oxford, for whose characteristic alertness there was substituted a profound quietness, a notable

air of absence, preoccupation. It was held by the villagers that she had gone a little bit strange-like. Her sister's death, it was thought, had made her a little touched-like. The "help," a gaunt and stern creature named Honor, who largely devoted herself to bringing up Percival on a system of copy-book and devotional maxims which had become considerably mixed in her mind, called her mistress's lapses into long silence symptoms of an "incline," and in kindly, rough fashion sought to rally her from them. Percival, nearest the truth, called them "thinking." When Aunt Maggie lapsed into such a mood, he would often stand by her, watching her face doubtfully and rather wistfully, with his head a little on one side. Presently he would give a little sigh and run off to his play. It was as though he puzzled to know what occupied her, as though he had some dim, unshaped idea which, while he stood watching, he tried to formulate — and the then little sigh: he could not discover it — yet.

What was clear was that nothing ever aroused Aunt Maggie from her strange habit of mind; and that at least is symptom of a dangerous melancholy. What was plain was that her fits of complete, of utter abstraction, embraced her like a sudden physical paralysis in the midst of even an energetic task or an absorbing conversation; and that at least is sign of a lesion somewhere in the faculty of self-control. She divided her time between those periods of "thinking" and an intense devotion to Percival; and the two phases acted directly one upon the other. It was in the midst of loving occupation with the child, that, perhaps at some look in his eyes, perhaps at some note in his voice, abstraction would suddenly strike down upon her; it was from the very depth of such abstraction that she would suddenly

start awake and go to find Percival or, he being near her, would take him almost violently into her arms.

II

In characteristic keeping with this habit, her action when now he ran to her and drew her from the roadway with his cry, "There's a cart coming! A cart, Aunt Maggie!" Her grey, gentle face and her sad eyes irradiated with a sudden colour and sudden light that advertised the affection with which, standing behind him to let the cart pass, she stooped down to him and kissed his glowing cheek — "Would I have been run over, do you think?"

Percival was eagerly awaiting the excitement of seeing the cart come into view around the bend whence it sounded. But he stretched up his hands to fondle her face. "Well, I believe you would, you know," he declared. "Of course they'd have shouted, but suppose the horse was bobbery and wouldn't stop?"

Aunt Maggie feigned alarm at this dreadful possibility. "Oh, but you're all right with me," Percival reassured her. He had a quaint habit of using phrases of hers. "I keep an eye on you, you know, even when I'm far behind."

She laughed and looked at him proudly; and she had reason for her pride. At seven — rising eight — Percival had fairly won through the vicissitudes of a motherless infancy. He had come through a lusty babyhood and was sprung into an alert and beautiful childhood, dowered of his father's strong loins, of his mother's gentle fairness, that caused heads to turn after him as he raced about the village street.

Heads turned from the cart that now approached

and passed. It proved to be a wagonette. Two women and a man sat among the many packages behind. On the box-seat, next the driver, was a lanky youth, peculiarly white and unhealthy of visage. Percival stared at him. In envy perhaps of the sturdy and glowing health of the starer, the lanky youth scowled back, and lowering his jaw pulled a grimace with an ease and repulsiveness that argued some practice. Turning in his seat, he allowed Percival to appreciate the distortion to the full.

This was that same Egbert Hunt, whose power of grimace opened, as it continues, our history.

Percival directed an interested face to Aunt Maggie. "Is that a clown sitting up there?" he asked her. He had accompanied Aunt Maggie into Great Letham on the previous day, and had been much engaged by the chalked countenance of a clown, grinning from posters of a coming circus.

Aunt Maggie answered him with her thoughts: "I think they must be going to the Manor, dear. I expect they are Lord Burdon's servants."

"Well, I'm sure he was a clown," Percival answered. But a few paces farther up the road, stepping into it from a footpath over the fields, a little old gentleman was met, whom Aunt Maggie greeted as Mr. Amber, and who verified her opinion.

"The family is coming down the day after to-morrow," Mr. Amber said, "as I was telling you last week. Servants are to arrive to-day. I think I saw them in the wagonette as I came down the path. And how are you, Master Percival? I hope you are very well."

Percival put his small hand into the extended palm. "I'm *very* well, Mr. Amber, thank you. One of them was a clown, you know. He made a face at me — like this."

"God bless my soul, did he indeed?" Mr. Amber exclaimed.

"Yes, he did," said Percival. "Just make it back again to me, will you please, so I can see if I showed you properly?"

But Mr. Amber declined the experiment. "The wind might change while I was doing it," he said, "and then I should be like that always."

"Oh, I shouldn't mind," Percival declared.

"But I should," said Mr. Amber, and poked Percival with his stick.

They were very close friends, Percival and this bent old librarian, permanently located at Burdon Old Manor in those days and a constant visitor at "Post Offic" for the purpose of enjoying the affection displayed in his silvery old face as it watched the glowing young countenance upturned to it. "But I should," said he; "and what would they think of me in there?"

Percival turned about. They had reached the boundary of the Manor grounds and he pointed through the trees. "Is that where you live, Mr. Amber?"

"Yes, I live in there. Look here, now, here's a nice thing! You're growing up nearly as big as me and you've never been to see me. That's not friendly, you know."

"Oh, but I've wanted to, you know," Percival cried. "We don't often come this way, you see, do we, Aunt Maggie?"

He bounded across the road to squint through the wooden paling that surrounds the Manor park, and Mr. Amber gave a little sigh and turned to Aunt Maggie.

"How Percival grows, Miss Oxford! And what a picture, what a picture! You know, he recalls to me walking these lanes twenty years ago, with just his count-

erpart in looks and spirits and charm—ah, well! dear me, dear me!" And he began to mumble to himself in the fashion of old people whose thoughts run more easily in the past than in the present, and to walk around poking with his stick in a fashion that was his own.

He referred to Roly, Aunt Maggie knew. "You never forget him, do you?" she said gently. She also was devoted to a memory. "You never forget him?"

"No — no," said Mr. Amber, poking around and not looking at her. "Certainly not — certainly not."

Percival's voice broke in upon them, announcing his observations through the fence. "I say, you've got a lovely garden to play in, you know," he called.

They turned from thoughts that had a common element to the bright young spirit in whom those thoughts found a not dissimilar relief.

"Well, it's not exactly my garden," Mr. Amber replied in his deliberate way. "I live there just like Honor lives with you. She looks after the cooking and I look after the books, eh? Would you like to see my books?"

"Picture books?"

"Why, yes, some have got pictures. Yes, there are pictures in some. And fine big rooms, Percival. You would like to see them."

Percival turned an excited face to Aunt Maggie, and Aunt Maggie smiled. He took Mr. Amber's hand. "Thank you very much indeed," he said. " I tell you what, then. I will see your books and then I think you will let me play in your garden, please, if you please?"

Mr. Amber declared that this was a very fair bargain. "Come in and have some tea, Miss Oxford. Mrs. Ferris will be glad to see you. She finds housekeeping very dull work, I am afraid, with only me to look after."

Aunt Maggie did not reply immediately. Percival looked at her anxiously. He observed signs of "thinking," and thinking might be fatal to this most engaging proposition. "If you possibly could, Aunt Maggie!" he pleaded.

But it was Mr. Amber's further argument that persuaded her. His words acutely entered the matter with which she was occupied. "You know, Percival must be the only soul in the countryside that hasn't seen the Manor," he urged. "It was the regular custom for any one who liked to come up in the old days. You recollect the Tenant Teas in the summer? Why, it's his right, I declare."

A little colour showed on her cheeks. "Yes, it is his right," she said.

III

Percival was to enjoy another right before the day was out. The decision to accept Mr. Amber's invitation once made, he had whooped ahead through the Manor gates and flashed up the long drive at play with a game of his own among the flanking trees. A noble turn in the avenue brought him within astonished gaze of the house, and, very flushed in the cheeks, he came racing back to his elders.

"I say, it's a perfectly 'normous house you live in, Mr. Amber."

"Aha!" cries old Mr. Amber, highly pleased. "I knew you would like it, Master Percival!"

"Why, I call it a *castle!*" Percival declares.

They turn the corner and Mr. Amber points with his stick. "Well, you're not quite wrong, either. That part — the East Wing we call that — you see how old

that is? Almost a castle once, that. See those funny little marks? Used to be holes there to fire guns through. What do you think of that?"

Percival's face proclaims what he thinks — and his voice, deep with awe, says, "Fire them bang?"

"Bang? I should think so, indeed!"

"Who at?"

"Aha! Strange little boys, perhaps. I'll tell you all about it, if you'll come and see me sometimes."

Percival announces that he will come every single day, and runs eagerly up the five broad steps that lead to the great oak door, now standing ajar, and halts wonderingly upon the threshold to gaze around the spacious hall and up at the gallery that encircles it.

Aunt Maggie stops so abruptly and gives so strange a catch at her breath that Mr. Amber turns to look at her. Following her eyes, and reading what he fancies in them, "Why, he does make a brave little picture, standing there, doesn't he?" Mr. Amber says.

Her faint smile seems to assent. But she sees the child, framed in the fine doorway, as his father's son surveying for the first time the domain that is his own.

They join him on the threshold and he turns to them round-eyed. "Why, it's simply 'normous!" he declares. "Aunt Maggie, come and look with me. It's simply 'normous."

"Told you so!" cries Mr. Amber, vastly delighted. "Fine big rooms, I said, didn't I, now?"

"'Normous!" Percival breathes. "Per-feck-ly 'normous to me, you know;" and after a huge sigh of wonder, pointing to the gallery, "What's that funny little bridge up there for?"

"Bridge!" says Mr. Amber almost indignantly. "Gallery, we call that. Goes right around the hall,

see? Except this end. Bridge! Bless my soul, bridge!" For the moment he is really almost put out at this slight done to a celebrated feature of the Manor, his concern betraying the profound devotion to the house, the sense of his own incorporation with it, that always characterises him when beneath its roof. That devotion and that sense have deepened greatly during these years in which the new Burdons have neglected the Manor and he, living in the past, has grown to feel himself the custodian of the memories as he is the author of the "Lives" of the house of Burdon. He has a trick, indeed, as Percival comes to know, of speaking of "we" when he talks of himself in connection with the Manor. He uses it now. "We are very proud of that gallery, I can tell you. Do you know we've had — well, well, never mind about that now. Come along, I'll take you all over and up there, too. Come along, Miss Oxford. We'll find Mrs. Ferris first."

Mr. Amber takes Percival's hand and starts up the hall; and then pulls him up short again, but with an exaggerated concern this time. "But here, I say, young man, what's this? Cap on! Good gracious, you can't wear your cap here, you know!"

Percival goes almost as red as the jolly red fisher cap he wears, and pulls it off, much abashed. He explains his breach of manners. "I always do take it off in a house. But this doesn't feel like a house to me, you know; it's simply 'normous!"

"Ah, but that's a strict rule of ours here. No one but a Burdon may be capped in the hall; a tradition we call it. There was a — a wicked man came here hundreds of years ago and kept on his hat and they didn't see his face properly and thought he was a good man; and the Lord Burdon that was then came to speak to

him, and the wicked man took out his dagger and killed Lord Burdon. What do you think of that?"

Percival seeks the proper touch. He asks: "With blug?"

"Blug — blood!" Mr. Amber exclaims testily, a trifle injured that his legends adapted to the use of children should lack conviction. "Why, bless my soul, of course there was blug — blood. Blug — dear me — blood!" and he puts so fierce an eye round where they stand, as if expecting a stain to ooze through the floor and corroborate him, that Percival draws back in haste lest he should be standing in the pool.

That makes Mr. Amber laugh and he pats Percival's golden head and concludes. "So ever since then, you see, we never let any but a Burdon wear his hat in the hall here. It would be a sign of coming disaster to the house, the tradition says."

He turns to Aunt Maggie. "My lady was very particular about it," he says. "She made a great point of observing all the traditions."

Jane Lady Burdon, though she has been dead these four years, is always "my lady" to Mr. Amber, as Roly remains to him "my lord" or "my young lord." Aunt Maggie, standing a little aside, looking at Percival, replies in her quiet voice: "I know — I remember. They are not so foolish — traditions — as some people think, Mr. Amber."

He nods his head in very weighty agreement, then turns again to Percival who, gazing round, discovers a new amazement. "But *two* fireplaces!" Percival cries.

"Big as a small room, too, aren't they?" says Mr. Amber, important and gratified again. "Now, look at that! There's another story for you!" He leads Percival to one vast hearth, high over which the Burdon arms

are carved in oak. "See those letters around there? That's our motto. That's the Burdon motto: 'I hold!' That was the message a Burdon sent to the king's troops when Cromwell's men — another wicked man, Cromwell — were trying to get in. 'I hold!' he told his messenger to say — just that, 'I hold!' and afterwards, when Cromwell was dead and another king came back, the king changed the Burdon motto to that. 'I hold!' Fine? Eh?"

"I hold!" breathes Percival, mightily impressed.

"Why, I tell you — I tell you," cries Mr. Amber, "there's a story in every inch of this house. Better stories than all your picture books. I'll just tell Mrs. Ferris about tea and then we'll go round. I know all the stories; no one knows them like I do." And he toddles off to Mrs. Ferris, absorbed in his lore and congratulating himself upon it, and Aunt Maggie and Percival are left alone.

It is then that Percival enjoys his second right of that day.

Aunt Maggie calls him to her. "Put on your cap again a minute, Percival — just for a minute."

"Oh, but I mustn't, Aunt Maggie."

She takes the cap from his hand and holds it above his clustering curls.

He protests. "Mr. Amber said so, you know."

"What did he say, dear?"

"Only Burdons, Aunt Maggie."

She placed the cap on his head and took his face between her hands and kissed him. She looked up, and all about the hall, and high to where, around the gallery, portraits of bygone Burdons looked steadily down upon her; and her lips moved as if she spoke some message that she signalled with her eyes.

"Whoever are you talking to, Aunt Maggie?"

She put her hands on his shoulders as he stood sturdily there, the jolly red fisher cap on the back of his head, a puzzled expression in his face, and she held him a pace from her. "Say the motto, Percival, dear — the Burdon motto. Do you remember it? Say it while you have your cap on — out loud!"

"Is it a game, Aunt Maggie?"

"Say it quickly, dear — out loud!"

"I hold!" says Percival, clear and sharp.

In the gallery behind him there was a sound of movement. He turned quickly and saw a man's figure step hastily away.

"Some one was watching us, Aunt Maggie."

But Aunt Maggie was gone into her "thinking."

IV

There followed for Percival the most delightful two hours. There was first a prodigal tea in the housekeeper's room, where motherly Mrs. Ferris set him to work on scones and cream and strawberry jam, and where, as the meal progressed, he gladly gave himself over to Mr. Amber's entrancing stories of Burdon lore, while Aunt Maggie and Mrs. Ferris gossiped together.

Mrs. Ferris confirmed the arrival of servants in advance of Lord and Lady Burdon and gave some details of the visit. Her ladyship had written to say they expected to stay about a month. They came for the purpose of seeing if the fine air, for a holiday of that length, would pick up Rollo. "An ailing child," said Mrs. Ferris. "Just the opposite of that young gentleman, from all accounts," and she nodded towards the young gentleman, who beamed back at her as cheerfully as a

prodigiously distended mouth would permit. "A lazy-looking lot," Mrs. Ferris thought the servants were, and ought to have come earlier, too, for there was work to be done getting the house ready, Miss Oxford might take her word for it — all the furniture and the pictures in dusting sheets — made her quite creepylike to look into the rooms sometimes. Not right, she thought it, to neglect the Manor like these were doing. She knew her place, mind you, but she meant to have a word with her ladyship before her ladyship went off again.

But the rooms had no creeps for Percival when at last the tea was done, the jam wiped off, and the promised tour of inspection started. He put a sticky hand confidingly into Mr. Amber's palm and breathed " 'Normous! Simply 'normous to me, you know," as each apartment was discovered to him; and stood absorbed, the most gratifying of listeners, while Mr. Amber, comfortably astride his hobby, poured forth the stories and the legends that had gone into his cherished "Lives" and that he had by heart and could tell with an air which called up the actors out of their frames and out of the very walls to play their parts before the child. Yet once or twice he stopped in the midst of a recital and stood frowning as though something puzzled him, and once for so long that Percival asked: "Are you thinking of something else, Mr. Amber?"

"Eh?" said Mr. Amber. "Thinking? I'm afraid I was. Let me see, where was I?" But he turned away, leaving the story unfinished; and as they walked from the room Percival said politely: "I don't mind if you were, you know. I only asked. Aunt Maggie does it and I just run away and play."

Mr. Amber pressed his old fingers closer about the young hand they held. "Don't run away when I do

it," he said. "Just wake me up. It keeps coming over me that I've done all this before — held a little boy's hand and told him all this just like I hold yours and tell you. Well, that's a very funny feeling, you know."

" 'Strordinary!" Percival agreed in his interested way; and Mr. Amber was caused to laugh and to forget the stirring in his mind of recollections buried there twenty years down. Twenty years is deep water. It was to be more disturbed, causing much frowning, much "funny feeling," before ever it should clear and show the old librarian, looking into the pool of his own mind over Percival's shoulder, Percival's reflection cast up from the depths.

The tour finished in the library. "Now this is the library!" announced Mr. Amber at the threshold, much as St. Peter, coming with a new spirit to the last gate, might say: "Now this is Paradise."

"Now this is the library. This is my room. Now, we'll just wipe our feet once again — sideways, too — that's right. And I think our fingers are still a little sticky, eh? that's better — *there!*"

" 'Normous!" breathed Percival. "Simply 'normous, to me, you know."

No dust sheets here, everything mellow with the deep sheen of age carefully attended. Tier upon tier of books, every hue of binding — dark red to brown, brown to deep blue, deep blue to white — and all, however worn, however aged, exquisitely responsive to Mr. Amber's soft chamois leather.

Mr. Amber waved a proud hand at them. "I expect you'll live a long time before you see another collection like this, Master Percival. And I know every one of them — every single one just like you know your toys.

In the pitch dark — in the pitch dark, mind you — I could put my hand on any one I wanted without touching another. What do you think of that, eh?"

Percival has no better thought for it than the old one. "'Normous!" he declares. "Simply 'normous to me, you know, Mr. Amber!"

"And the care I take of them!" Mr. Amber continues, as pleased with his audience as if Percival were the librarians of the House of Lords, the Bodleian and the British Museum rolled into one. "You wouldn't find enough dust on those books, *anywhere*, to cover the head of a pin!" He points to the highest and furthest shelves: "You'd think there might be dust right up there, wouldn't you? Well, you just choose one of those books — any one, anywhere you like."

"To keep for my own?"

"Keep! Bless my soul, no! Keep! Dear me! dear me! No, just point to a book."

"That one!" says Percival, stretching an arm. "That one in the corner!"

Mr. Amber accepts the challenge with a triumphant rubbing together of his hands. "That brown one, eh? Very well. That's a rare volume — Black Letter — Latimer's 'Fruitfull Sermons' — London, 1584. Now, you see." He trots excitedly to a high, wheeled ladder, runs it beneath the "Fruitfull Sermons," climbs up shakily, fetches down the volume and presents it for Percival's inspection: "There! Run your finger over the top of it; that's where dust collects. Ah, not that finger; got a cleaner one? That'll do. Now!"

It is getting dusk in the library, so Mr. Amber clutches the small finger that has rubbed over the "Fruitfull Sermons," and they go to a deep window where young head and old peer anxiously at the pink skin.

"Not a speck!" Mr. Amber cries triumphantly. "Not a speck of dust! What did I tell you?"

And Percival, holding the finger carefully apart from its fellows: "'Strordinary! Simply 'strordinary to me, you know!"

Mr. Amber climbs laboriously up the steps again, and seats himself at the top, and starts dusting all around the "Fruitfull Sermons," and completely forgets Percival, who wanders about for a little and then, hearing a sound, goes to the door.

V

Here was the white-faced youth, our Egbert Hunt, who had grimaced at him from the box of the wagonette. The white-faced youth stood on the further side of the passage, paused beneath a window by whose light he seemed to be examining a small phial held in his hand.

Percival ran forward: "Hallo! Are you a clown, please?"

The white-faced youth bit a pale lip and stared resentfully: "Do you live here?"

"No, I don't," Percival told him. "I've been having tea with Mrs. Ferris."

The white-faced youth developed the sudden heat characteristic of Egbert Hunt in the Miller's Field days. "Well, don't you call me no names, then," said Egbert Hunt fiercely.

"I'm not," Percival protested. "You made a face at me when you were driving in the road, and I thought you were a clown, you see."

Egbert Hunt breathed hotly through his nose. "Saucing me, ain't you?" he demanded.

Percival had heard the expression in the village. "Oh,

no," he said in his earnest way. "I thought you had a funny face, that was all."

His engaging tone and air mollified the sour Egbert. "I've got a sick yedache," said Egbert. "That's what I've got — crool!"

Percival looked sorry and sought to give comfort with a phrase of Aunt Maggie. "It will *soon* go," he said soothingly.

"Not mine," Egbert declared. "Not my sort won't. I'm a living martyr to 'em. Fac'." He nodded with impressive gloom and took three tabloids from the phial he held in his hand. "Vegules," he explained; and swallowed them with a very loud gulping sound.

"What are you, please?" Percival inquired, vastly interested.

"Slave," said Egbert briefly.

"But you're not black," argued Percival, recalling the picture of a chained negro on a missionary almanac in Honor's kitchen.

"Thenk Gord, no!" said Egbert piously. "White slaves are worse," he added.

"And were those slaves in the carriage with you?"

"Tyrangs," said Egbert Hunt. "Tyrangs and sicko-pants of tyrangs."

Percival started a question; then, as a sound came: "That's my Aunt Maggie calling me. Good-by! I hope your poor head will soon be better."

Egbert smiled the wan smile of one not to be deluded into hope: "You've been kind to me," he said. "I like you. You ain't like all the rest. What's your name?"

"Percival. I really must go now, if you please. My Aunt Maggie —"

He started to run in the direction of Aunt Maggie's

voice; but Egbert recalled him with a very mysterious and compelling "H'st!" and wag of the head.

"Was that your Aunt Maggie in the hall with you just now?" Egbert inquired.

A sudden recollection came to Percival. "You mean before tea? Was that you?"

"What she make you put your cap on for, and say 'I hold'? That was a funny bit, that was."

"Why, I don't know," said Percival. "Was that you up on the bridge?"

Egbert did not answer the question. "You ask her," he said, "an' tell me. Odd bit, that was."

"Yes, I will," Percival agreed. "I say, I must go. What's your name, if you please?"

"Mr. Unt. Run along; you're a nice little chap; I like you."

"I like you, too," said Percival, very interested in this strange character. "I'm sorry I thought you were a clown. Good-by, Mr. Unt. I say, there *is* my Aunt Maggie! Isn't this a 'normous house?" and he scampered brightly to the sound of Aunt Maggie's voice.

"Abode of tyrangs," said Mr. Hunt, moving swiftly in the opposite direction. "Boil um!"

CHAPTER II

FOLLOWS A FROG AND FINDS A TADPOLE

I

THE acquaintance with slave Egbert was very shortly renewed. The afternoon of the Friday that was to see the arrival of the Burdons at the Old Manor brought also a threshing-engine up the village street — a snorting and enormous thing that fetched Percival rushing to the gate and drew him after it and kept him in charmed attendance until "Post Offic" was half a mile behind. Here the engine stopped, and the men who accompanied it setting themselves to a deliberate meal, Percival turned himself into a horse that had escaped from its stable and was recaptured and began to trot himself home.

He was in the lane that strikes out of the highroad towards Burdon Old Manor when his quick eye caught sight of a frog in the grass-grown hedge-side and "Whoa!" cried Percival and changed from escaped horse to ardent frog-hunter. The sturdiest frog, it proved to be, a big, solid fellow and wonderfully nimble at great jumps when Percival was found to be in pursuit. He pressed it hotly; it bounded amain. He laughed and followed — it was here — it was there — it was lost — it was found — it was gone again. He grew stubborn and vexed in the chase. A frown stood on his moist brow. He began to breathe hotly. The frog perceived

the change. It lost its wits. It dashed from cover, made with wild bounds across the road, was closely followed, and lived to tell the frightful tale by intervention of a shout before it, a stumble behind it, and the barest pulling up of the Manor wagonette within a yard of fallen Percival.

Lord Burdon jumped out and lifted Percival in his arms before the frog-hunter was well aware of what had happened. "Not hurt, eh? That's all right! You young rascal, you—you might have been killed. Haven't you got ears? What are those great flappers for, eh?" and Lord Burdon tweaked a flapper and laughed jovially. "What were you doing, eh?"

"I was chasing a frog," said Percival, rubbing his ear and using his elevation on Lord Burdon's arms to have a stare at the little boy and the pretty lady in the wagonette.

"A frog! Why here's a frog for you. Come and look at my frog in the cart here."

Lord Burdon carried him to the body of the wagonette. "Here's my frog! tadpole, rather. Rollo, look here. You're only a little tadpole, aren't you? Look what this fine air is going to do for you. Look at this great lump of a fellow. That's what you've got to be like!"

The little tadpole smiled shyly. Tadpole was an excusable description. Rollo Letham at nearly ten might have passed for younger than Percival at rising eight. He was very thin, pale, fragile; his head looked too big for his delicate frame; his eyes were big and shy, his mouth nervous.

"A shame!" said Lady Burdon, smiling. "You're not a tadpole, are you, Rollo? But this is a splendid young man!" And she stretched a kind hand — nicely gloved — across the cart to Percival.

Lord Burdon raised him to meet it. Bare knees, well-streaked with mud and blood, came into view.

"Oh, your poor little knees!" Lady Burdon cried.

Percival caught Rollo's eye fixed in some horror on the wounds. "I cut them every day!" he said bigly, and shot a proud glance at the tadpole.

"Well, they're terrible. They must be washed. Bring him in, Maurice. We'll wash him, as we've nearly killed him, at the house."

"Yes, do! Yes, please do!" Rollo whispered, and his mother patted his hand, pleased at the animation of the thin little face.

Lord Burdon hesitated: "Take him to the Manor? Why, that may be miles from his home, you know."

"I suppose we can send him back in the trap, can't we?" Lady Burdon said, a trifle disagreeably. "You're a regular old woman, Maurice. Lift him in next to Rollo. You can see how Rollo takes to him, I should have thought."

"Didn't want to be had up for kidnapping, you know," Lord Burdon responded cheerfully. "Would be a bad start in the local opinion — eh?" And he laughed with the appeal and the apology with which he always met his wife's waves of impatience. "Shove up, Rollo! In you get, frog-hunter! Heavens! What a lump. All right. Drive on!"

"Gee up!" cried Percival, highly entertained, and chatted frankly with Lady Burdon as the wagonette bowled along. To her questions he was nearly eight, he told her; he would have another birthday in a short time; Honor gave him a sword at his last birthday and his Aunt Maggie gave him a trumpet. "You may blow my trumpet, if you like," turning to Rollo. "Honor says it is poison to blow it because I've broken the little

white thing what you blow through. But I blow it all right."

Rollo flushed and smiled and put a thin little hand from beneath the rug and took Percival's muddy fist and held it for the remainder of the journey. Boy friends who did not laugh at him were new to him.

"Miss Oxford's little boy," Percival explained to further questions. "I live at the post-office, and we've got a drawer *full* of stamps with funny little holes what you tear off."

Lady Burdon turned to her husband: "Ah, I know now. You remember? You remember the vicar telling us about Miss Oxford when we first came down here? Well, she's to be congratulated on her nephew. I'm glad. He'll be the jolliest little companion for Rollo."

Lord Burdon remembered. "Yes — this will be her sister's child. Orphan, poor little beggar."

And Lady Burdon: "We'll be able to have him up with Rollo as much as we like, I've no doubt. Look how happy they are together," and she smiled at them, chatting eagerly.

Percival was twisting and bending the better to see the occupants of the box-seat. A form that seemed familiar sat beside the driver. "Why, that's Mr. Unt!" Percival cried brightly, and as the familiar form turned at the sound of its name, "How's your poor headache, Mr. Unt?" he asked. "Much better now, isn't it?"

Mr. Unt's pallid face became slightly tinged with embarrassment. "The young gentleman spoke to me at the Manor Wednesday, me lady," he apologised. "Had come up to take tea with Mr. Hamber." He profited by the touch of his hat with which he spoke to draw his hand across his forehead; a sick yedache clearly was still torturing there.

"His headaches are terrible," Percival explained. "I thought he was a clown, you know. I saw him driving in this carriage with tyrangs."

Egbert's back shivered. "Parding, me lady," said he, turning again.

Lady Burdon laughed. "Hunt," she told Percival. "Not Unt. He speaks badly."

"You know, his headaches —" Percival began; and she added more severely: "He is a servant."

"He's my servant," Rollo said. "Hunt looks after me when I go out. I hate nurses, so I have him. He'll be yours too, if you'll come and play with me. Both of ours. May he, mother?"

"You can tell Miss Oxford that some one will always be there to keep an eye on you if she will let you come and play," Lady Burdon replied to Percival.

"So now he is yours and mine," cried Rollo, squeezing the hand he held.

"Thank you very much," Percival said. "Of course, if his headache is very bad we won't have him, because he will like to lie down."

He spoke clearly; and a tiny little tremble of Egbert's back seemed to advertise again the gratitude that sympathy aroused in him.

"Oh, that's nothing," Rollo declared. "He pretends."

The poor back drooped. "Tyrangs," Egbert murmured and furtively edged a vegule to his mouth.

II

In the dusk of that evening Percival went bounding home, immensely pleased with his new friends and with the new delights in life they had discovered for him. He had nice clean knees and a bandage on each — a matter

that caused him considerable pride. He had gladly promised to come to see Rollo again on the morrow, and he would have stayed much longer into the evening had not Lord Burdon (as Lady Burdon said) "begun to fidget" and to persist that Miss Oxford must be getting nervous at this long absence.

"His aunt will naturally be glad when she knows where he has been," Lady Burdon had exclaimed.

Lord Burdon gave the smile that she knew came before one of his annoying rejoinders. "That won't make her wild with joy while she doesn't know where he is, old girl."

She was irritable. The vexation of having to leave London, which she enjoyed, for Burdon which she felt she would hate, was settling upon her. She looked at him resentfully. "That is funny, I suppose?" she inquired. "You are always very funny, aren't you?" and she gave orders for Hunt to take Percival home.

Down the road Percival chattered brightly to Egbert, holding his hand. "I jump like this," he explained, capering along, "because I pretend I'm a horse. Then if you want me to walk quietly you only have to say 'whoa!' you see."

"Whoa!" said Egbert very promptly.

Percival's legs itched to jump out the animation that events had bottled into him. "Did you say 'gee up'?" he presently inquired.

"No," said Egbert.

"Oh," said Percival, and with a little sigh repeated "oh!"

Egbert felt the appeal. "Fac' of it is, that jumping jerks me up."

"Got another sick headache, have you?"

"Crool," said the living martyr to 'em.

Percival took another phrase of Aunt Maggie: "You must be thor'ly out of sorts, I think."

"Got one foot in the grave, that's what I've got," Egbert agreed. "Fac'."

Percival peered down at Egbert's legs. "Which one, please?" he inquired.

"Figger o' speech," Egbert told him, and explained: "Way of saying things." He added: "Go off in the night one of these days, I shall;" and commented with gloomy satisfaction: "Then they'll be sorry."

Percival asked: "Who will?" He visioned Egbert running by night with one foot embedded in a tombstone, and he was considerably attracted by the picture. "Who will?" he repeated.

"Tyrangs!" said Egbert. "Too late to be sorry then. Fac'."

"Well, I should be dreffly sorry," Percival assured him.

"Believe you," said Egbert, "and many thanks for the same. First that's ever said a kine word to me, you are; and I'll be grateful — if I'm spared."

He looked at his watch and then down the lane. "Think you could get home safe from here? Fac' is I'm behind with my vegules and left them in my other coat."

"Oh, yes," Percival agreed. "This is just by the corner, you know."

"Well, then," said Egbert, halting, "you see, if I don't take 'em fair, can't expec' them to treat me fair, can I?"

Percival assented: "Oh, no."

"Sure you'll be all right?"

"Oh, yes. I'll be a horse, you see. Just say 'gee up!' will you?"

"Gee up!" said Egbert.

"Stead-*ey*!" cried Percival, prancing. "Stead-*ey*! Good night!" and bounded off.

"Nice little f'ler," commented Egbert; and hurried back to the vegules.

Where the lane turned to the village, horse Percival was made, as he declared, to shy dreff'ly. He galloped almost into the arms of two figures that stepped suddenly out of the dusk. "Oh, Percival!" Aunt Maggie cried and kissed him. "Oh, Percival, where *have* you been?"

"Say 'whoa!'" cried Percival. "Say 'whoa!' Aunt Maggie. I'm a horse — a white one, you know."

Two heavy hands pressed the white horse's shoulders, stilling its plunges. "You're a bad little boy, that's what you are," Honor exclaimed, "running off and frightening your Auntie, and not caring nor minding. Don't Care comes before a fall, as I've told you many times and —"

"*Pride* comes before a fall," corrected Percival. "You've got it wrong *again*, Honor," and Honor's flow was checked with the suddenness that had become the established termination of attempts to reprove Percival since he had learnt the right phrasing of her store of confused maxims.

She took his hand while she pondered doubtfully upon the correction, and with Aunt Maggie holding the other, he skipped along, bubbling over with his adventures. "I've got bandages on both my legs, Aunt Maggie — oh, and Hunt has got one of his legs in the grave, just fancy that! I've been having tea with Rollo; and Lady Burdon put on these bandages and she wants me to go and play with Rollo every day. *Do* let me, Aunt Maggie. I say, you are squeezing my hand most dreffly, you know."

Aunt Maggie relaxed the sudden contraction of her fingers. "Lady Burdon — yes? — tell from the very beginning, Percival dear."

"Well, she said 'Promise to tell your Aunt Maggie I will come and ask her to let you be Rollo's little friend and' — Aunt *Maggie!* You're *hurting!*"

She recollected herself again and patted the small fingers. "Tell from the very beginning, dear. How did you meet them?"

"Well, you understand, I was catching a frog —"

"Post Offic" was reached, supper was swallowed, his merry head beginning to droop and nod, while still he excitedly recounted all his adventures. He was almost asleep when Aunt Maggie undressed him and put him to bed.

She sat a long time beside him, watching him while he slept.

CHAPTER III

LADY BURDON COMES TO "POST OFFIC"

I

In the morning Lady Burdon came with Rollo to make her request that Percival might spend much of his time at the Old Manor as Rollo's playmate. In these seven years since the amazement at Miller's Field, this was but her third visit to the estate, her first for the purpose of staying any length of time, and the first that had seen Rollo with her. Two days had been spent here when Jane Lady Burdon had been brought to rest in Burdon churchyard; three when Mr. Maxwell, the agent, had been troublesome and importunate in the matter of expensive alterations on the property. Lady Burdon had come down then "to have an understanding with him;" as she expressed it—"to see for herself." The result had been as unfortunate for Mr. Maxwell (to whom she had shown some temper) as it had been augmentative of the dislike she had always felt for the property and its greedy responsibilities. The result had been to filter over the countryside from Mr. Maxwell that she was the controlling partner in the new representatives of the house; that hers was the refusal to take up the urgently needed irrigation scheme; hers the scandal (as it became) of neglect to carry out improvements in the cottages over at Abbess Roding; hers the crime (as it was held) of the selling-up over at Shepwall that entailed eviction of tenants old on the land as the house of Burdon itself.

On the other hand the result had been to return Lady Burdon to the Mount Street life with at least a temporary stop put to the Maxwell whinings and at least a lighter drain from the Mount Street expenses.

Miss Oxford had not seen her on either of these visits. Miss Oxford had only smiled in an odd way when she heard of the behaviour that had set the countryside clacking. The better Lady Burdon flourished, the more Lady Burdon exercised the prerogatives of her usurped position, the riper she ripened for the blow, when there should be returned to her the son whose mother she had murdered; that was the entertainment Miss Oxford nursed through these years, living so gently and so quietly, "thinking" so much, poor dear.

"Strange-like?" "Silly-like?" Or dreadfully sane? For Miss Oxford's own part, she knew only one thing of her mental condition. At very rare intervals there seized her a state that was related to and that recalled the tremendous pressure in her brain when she had knelt, consumed with hate and desire for vengeance, by Audrey's death-bed. It took the form of a sudden violent fluttering in her brain, as though a live, winged thing were beating there, beating to be free. The pressure that came by Audrey's death-bed had ended in a snap — in something giving that left her extraordinarily, tinglingly calm, possessed by the plan and certainty of revenge to be taken by Audrey's son — one day. The fluttering, the winglike beating ended of its own volition, and outside any command she could put upon it — sweeping up all her senses in its beating, only leaving to her the terror that it would end — in what? Sometimes it came in just the tiniest flutter, without cause and gone as soon as come, just arresting her and frightening her like a swift shoot of pain in a nerve. Sometimes in the

briefest flutter but with cause; such a case had been when Percival told her of his meeting with the Burdons and she had caused him to exclaim by clutching his hand. Once of much longer duration and of new effect, and with revelation to her of the end it threatened. That was when, a few days ago, she had stood alone with Percival in the great hall of Burdon Old Manor. It was the fluttering that had bade her make him put on his cap and cry 'I hold!' and she had been informed that if it did not stop — if it did not stop! — if it did not stop! she would scream out her secret — run through the house and cry to all that Lady Burdon was —

It had stopped. The beating wings ceased. She was returned to her quiet, gentle waiting.

II

It always took the same form — the presentation of a picture.

"They're coming! They're coming!" cried Percival, bursting into the parlour with tossing arms, aflame with excitement, hopping on lively toes, to announce Lady Burdon and Rollo. "They're coming, Aunt Maggie!" and he was away to greet them at the gate.

Aunt Maggie was at the table where post-office business was conducted. The open door gave directly on to the garden path; and she heard voices and then a step on the threshold and bent over the papers before her; and then a pleasant tone that said "Good morning, I am Lady Burdon," and immediately the beating wings, wild, savage, whirling, and she transported from where she sat to watch herself in the picture that the fluttering always brought.

Immense beating of the wings, the sound drumming

in her ears; seven years rolled up as a stage-curtain discloses a scene, and she saw the room in the Holloway road, herself kneeling there and Audrey's voice: ". . . and then said 'I am Lady Burdon' . . . O Maggie! O Maggie! . . . and I said 'Oh, how can you be Lady Burdon?' . . . Maggie! Maggie!" The beating wings drove up to a pitch they had never before reached. Through their tumult — buffeted, as it were, by their fury — and from the scene in which she saw herself, she looked up and saw Lady Burdon smiling there, and heard Lady Burdon's voice: "Good morning, I am Lady Burdon." Again, as in the great hall with Rollo, if it did not stop!—if it did not stop!—if it did not stop! she must cry out: "You are not! You said that to Audrey and killed her! Now —"

And again, and this time when the terrible fluttering had almost beaten itself free and she had formed her lips to release it, it suddenly stopped. As at the bedside, seven years before, she fell from paroxysm of passion to unnatural calm, so now she was returned to her normal, quiet self, content to wait, and she said quite quietly: "Percival told me to expect you."

Lady Burdon advanced pleasantly. "Ah, and I hope he also remembered to tell you of my apologies. I am afraid we kept him with us much too long last night."

She looked around the room with the air of one willing to chat and to be entertained, and Miss Oxford, murmuring there was no occasion for apology, advanced a chair with: "Please sit down, if you will. This is very humble, I am afraid. It is only the post-office, you know; and only a toy post-office at that."

She was quite herself again. Through this interview, and always thereafter when she met Lady Burdon or

thought of her, she was invested with the calmness that had come to her by the death-bed. She knew quite certainly that she had only to wait. She was not at all anxious. She knew she could wait. She only feared — now for the first time, and increasingly as the attacks became more frequent — that an onset of that dreadful fluttering might descend upon her and might not go before it had driven her to wreck the plan for which she waited — Percival, not she, to avenge his mother.

The fear caused in her a noticeable nervousness of manner. Lady Burdon attributed it to natural embarrassment at this gracious visit, and that made her more gracious yet. Miller's Field would have perceived in Lady Burdon, as she sat talking pleasantly, a considerable change from the Mrs. Letham it had known. She was very becomingly dressed. She had grown a trifle rounder in the figure and fuller in the face since Miller's Field gave her good-by, and that advantaged her. Her olive complexion was warmer in shade, healthier in tinting than it had been. The walk from the Manor had touched her freshly, and she had been pleased by the respectful greetings of the villagers. Rollo, completely in love with Percival, was brighter than she had ever known him. She had hated the idea of burying herself down here for a month; but she was beginning to entertain an agreeable view of taking up her neglected position and dignity in this pleasant countryside. She was very happy as she faced Miss Oxford: her happiness and all that contributed to it made her very comely to the eye; and she was aware of that.

She spoke enthusiastically of Percival. "Such a splendid young man. Such charming manners." She spoke most graciously of knowing all about Miss Oxford and of how plucky of her it was to take up the post-

office. She said smilingly that Miss Oxford was not to take advantage of the post-office by keeping herself to herself as the saying was; and when Miss Oxford replied; "You are kind; we have no society here, of course; with the one or two families the post-office makes no difference; we are all old friends; with you, it is different;" she said very winningly: "Not kind, in any case — selfish. It is Percival I am after. We have taken so much to him. He and my Rollo have struck up the greatest friendship, and that is such a pleasure to me. Rollo as a rule is so shy and reserved with children. He has no child friends. It will do him a world of good if Percival may play with him. Percival will be the making of him."

She smiled in confident and happy belief of her words, and Miss Oxford smiled, too. It was not for Lady Burdon to know — yet — that Percival was being brought up to be not Rollo's making but his undoing.

But Miss Oxford only said that the friendship would be capital for Percival also, since Lady Burdon permitted it. "There are no boys here in Little Letham that he can make close companions," she said. "We seem short of children — except among the villagers. I think Mrs. Espart's little girl at Upabbot over the Ridge is the nearest."

Lady Burdon nodded. "Mrs. Espart — yes, I am to go over there. She left cards, thinking we had arrived. Abbey Royal, she lives at, doesn't she?"

"Abbey Royal, yes. One of our show places, you know. What Percival would call 'normous," and Miss Oxford related the " 'normous; simply 'normous to me, you know," of Percival's visit to the Manor. "We came to 'enormous' when I was reading to him shortly afterwards," she said, "and he exclaimed: 'I know!

'Normous, like Mr. Amber's house!' Mr. Amber showed him round."

"He is the sweetest little fellow," Lady Burdon laughed. "And reading to him — I was going to ask you about that — about lessons, I mean. Does he do lessons? Rollo's education has been terribly neglected, I am afraid. I thought it would be so nice if he could join his new friend in them while he is here."

"Percival goes every morning to Miss Purdie — you would have passed her cottage — next to the Church."

"Capital," Lady Burdon said. "I will arrange for Rollo."

"She will be delighted. Having Percival has already lost her a chance of another pupil. Mrs. Espart was going to send her little girl over daily, but didn't like the idea of the post-office little boy."

"Ridiculous!" Lady Burdon cried. "I will tell her so." She turned at the sound of much scrambling and laughter in the doorway. "Ridiculous! Rollo, you are going to do lessons with Percival. Now won't that be jolly, darling?"

But it was Percival who was first in and came bounding to them with: "Aunt Maggie! Aunt Maggie! Rollo has got a pony of his own in London and rides it! Well, what do you think of that?"

Aunt Maggie thought it splendid and was introduced to Rollo, and "suddenly seemed to lose her tongue," as Lady Burdon told Lord Burdon at lunch. "Hugged Percival as though she hadn't seen him for a year and scarcely looked at Rollo. Jealous, I believe, at the difference between their stations. Funny, that kind of jealousy, don't you think?"

But it was not jealousy that had silenced Aunt Maggie and caused her to clutch Percival to her breast. At

sight of him with Rollo, and of Lady Burdon smiling at him, that fluttering had run up in her brain, and she had clasped Percival to restrain herself while it lasted. It had gone while she held him; but she had almost cried: "Do you dare smile at him? He is Audrey's son! Audrey's son!"

Percival wriggled from her embrace and she heard Lady Burdon say to Rollo: "Well, why not a pony here?" and heard her laugh delightedly at the excited roar the suggestion shot out of Percival.

"I wonder if there is anywhere here we could get a pony for Rollo?" she heard Lady Burdon say, and heard the question repeated, and made a great effort to come out of the shaken state in which the fluttering had left her.

"Over at Market Roding you might get a pony," she said dully. "There is a Mr. Hannaford there. He has ponies. He supplies ponies to circuses, I have heard."

Lady Burdon kissed Percival good-by at the gate. "Lord Burdon shall take you over with Rollo to this Mr. Hannaford," she told him. "That Miss Purdie's cottage? We are going to look in on our way. Run back to your Aunt Maggie. She is tired, I think."

"Well, she's thinking, you know," said Percival.

Lady Burdon laughed. "Thinking, is she, you funny little man? Of what?"

And Percival, in his earnest way: "Well, I don't know. It 'plexes me, you know."

CHAPTER IV

LITTLE 'ORSES AND LITTLE STU-PIDS

I

THE pony was obtained from Mr. Hannaford and lessons were arranged with Miss Purdie.

It was the happiest party that occupied the wagonette on that drive to and from Mr. Hannaford's farm at Market Roding. Lord Burdon, Rollo, Percival — each declared it that evening to have been the very jolliest time that ever was.

"Well, we have had a jolly day, haven't we, old man?" Lord Burdon said to Rollo when he kissed him good night. Lord Burdon had worn a shabby old suit and had told the boys stories till, as he assured them, his tongue ached; and had walked with them about Mr. Hannaford's farm, with Percival prancing on one side and Rollo quietly beaming on the other. In London, in the life that Lady Burdon directed at Mount Street, such careless, childish joys were impossible. Not since the day he had spent with Rollo at the Zoölogical Gardens, when Lady Burdon was at Ascot, had he so completely enjoyed himself — and not a doubt but that the bursting excitement of young Percival was responsible for the far greater joviality of this day at Mr. Hannaford's.

"Did I tell you about when they came to the ditch while we were walking over the farm?" Lord Burdon asked Lady Burdon. "That little beggar Percival —"

Lady Burdon looked at him over the book she was read-

ing. "Not a sixth time, *please*, Maurice," she said. "I'm really rather tired of hearing it," and Lord Burdon assumed his foolishly distressed look and for the remainder of the evening sat smiling over the jolly day in silence.

The jolliest day for Rollo! He had been the quiet one of the party because to be retiring was his nature, but when Percival shouted and when Percival jumped, Rollo's heart was in the shout and Rollo's spirit bounded with the jump. He had never believed there could be such a friend for him or so much new fun in life. Hitherto his chief companion had been his mother, his constant mood a dreamy and shrinking habit of mind. Vigorous Percival introduced him to the novelty of "games," showed him what mirth was, and what vigorous young limbs could do. The jolliest day! He fell asleep that night thinking of Percival; in his dreams with Percival raced and shouted; awakened in the morning with Percival for his first thought.

And of course it was the jolliest day for Percival. "I never had such fun, you know," Percival declared to Aunt Maggie. "I rode the pony all alone and Mr. Hannaford said I was a Pocket Marvel; so I should like to know what you think of that?"

Mr. Hannaford, indeed, was mightily pleased with Percival. Mr. Hannaford was an immensely stout man with a tremendously deep voice and with very twinkling little eyes set in a superbly red face. He wore brown leather gaiters and very tight cord-breeches and a very loose tail-coat of tweed, cut very square. From his habit of never removing his bowler hat in the house even at meals, the common belief was that he slept in it, and he punctuated his sentences when he spoke, and marked his alternate strides when he walked, by tremendously loud cracks of a bamboo cane against a gaitered leg. It

was his frequent habit when he desired emphasis to bless what he termed his "eighteen stun proper," and he caused Rollo to giggle by his trick of calling a horse "a norse."

Mr. Hannaford received his visitors by raising his hat as far from his head as any one had ever seen it, by giving three terrific cracks of his cane against his leg, and by extending to Rollo and Percival in turn a hand of the size of a small shoulder of mutton.

"Well, you've come to the right place for a little 'orse, me lord, bless my eighteen stun proper if you haven't," Mr. Hannaford declared. "And 'll want a proper little 'orse for your lordship's son, moreover," continued Mr. Hannaford, after another tremendous leg-and-cane crack and looking admiringly at Percival.

Percival was quick with the correction. "Oh, I'm not his son. I'm only a little boy, you know. I can ride, though, because sometimes I pretend I'm a horse all day long; so I should like to know what you think of that?"

Mr. Hannaford was hugely delighted, and having begged his lordship's pardon for the mistake, gave it as his deliberate opinion that a young gentleman who could pretend he was a norse all day long was a Pocket Marvel.

The Pocket Marvel performed a prance or two in order to show that this estimate of him was well merited, and they proceeded to the stables, Mr. Hannaford, as they walked, making clear, to the tune of astonishing leg-and-cane cracks, the reasons why the right place for a little 'orse had been selected by his lordship.

"There's money in little 'orses," said Mr. Hannaford. (Crack!) "And I'm one of the few that know it." (Crack!) He broke off, stared towards the house, face changing from its superb red to astonishing purple, and to a distant figure roared "Garge!" in a voice like a clap of thunder. "Garge! Fetch that pig out of the flower beds!

You want my stick about your back, Garge; bless my eighteen stun proper if you don't."

"Pardon, me lord," begged Mr. Hannaford, bringing his stick back to his leg from where it had flourished at Garge, and continuing: "There's more demand for little 'orses than anybody that hasn't given brain to it would believe, me lord. Gentlefolks' little girls want little 'orses and gentlefolks' little boys want little 'orses; gentlefolks' little carts want little 'orses, young gentlemen want little polo 'orses, and circuses want little trick 'orses. Where are they going to get 'em?" inquired Mr. Hannaford, and answered his question with: "They're coming to me." (Crack!)

"Capital!" declared Lord Burdon, who was finding Mr. Hannaford a man nearer to his liking than any he had met within the radius of Mount Street.

"Capital's the word," agreed Mr. Hannaford. "Bless my eighteen stun proper if it isn't!" (Crack!) "It will take time, mind you, me lord. I'm doing it in stages. Stage One: circus little 'orses. I rackon I'm level with Stage One now. Started with circus little 'orses because I was in the circus line once and my brother Martin — Stingo they call him, me lord — is in it now. Proper connaction with circus little 'orses I've worked up. They come to me when they want a circus little 'orse, bless my eighteen stun proper if they don't." (Crack!) "Stage Two: little gentlefolks' little 'orses — just starting that now, me lord. Stage Three: gentlefolks' little carts' little 'orses. Stage Four: young gentlemen's little polo 'orses. What I want," declared Mr. Hannaford with a culminating crack of tremendous proportions, "is to make people when they see a little 'orse think of Hannaford. Hannaford — little 'orse; little 'orse — Hannaford. Two words one meaning, one meaning two

words; that's my lay and I'll do it, bless my eighteen stun proper if I won't!" (Crack!)

"'Pon my soul it's a big scheme," said Lord Burdon, highly entertained and beginning to realise that this was no common man.

"Correct!" Mr. Hannaford assured him, and confided with a terrible crack: "I call it a whopper. One of these days Stingo will settle down and join me and there'll be no more holding us than you can hold a little 'orse with your finger and thumb."

"Settle down?" Lord Burdon questioned, greatly interested. "Younger than you, eh?"

"Three and a half minutes," returned Mr. Hannaford, and added, "Twins," in reply to Lord Burdon's exclamation of surprise. "Not much in point of time, but very different in point of nature. Wants settling down; then he'll be all right. You'll see Stingo in a minute, me lord; he's here," and Mr. Hannaford pointed to the line of sheds they had reached. "On a visit," he explained; and added with a heavy sigh: "Here to-day and gone to-morrow; that's Stingo."

He unlatched a door. "This way, me lord. Only wooden stables at present; brick, and brick floors, that's to come. This way, my young lordship. This way, little master; don't you be a little 'orse now, else maybe we shall make a mistake and tie you up in a stall."

The interior was dim. Restless movements announced the presence of several little 'orses, and presently was to be seen a line of plump little quarters, mainly piebald, one or two more sedately coloured.

"Gentleman to buy a little 'orse," announced Mr. Hannaford; and immediately a face that was the precise replica of his own appeared from over the side of a partition.

"Well he's come to the proper place for a little 'orse," announced the face in a very husky whisper and disappeared again.

"Why, just my very words!" declared Mr. Hannaford with high delight. "Just my very words, bless my eighteen stun proper if it wasn't! Step out, Stingo. Lord Burdon, over from Burdon, with his young lordship and a —" Mr. Hannaford stopped and stared around him. "Why, wherever's that young Pocket Marvel got to?"

"I'm here!" Percival called excitedly. "I'm stroking this dear little black one and he knows me; so I should like to know what you think of that?" He came dancing out from the stall of the little black one, his face blazing with excitement, and simultaneously the replica of Mr. Hannaford's face appeared again and a replica of Mr. Hannaford's figure advanced towards them.

"Proud!" declared the replica in a strained whisper, and raised his hat. "You're doing well," he whispered to Mr. Hannaford. "You're doing uncommon well." He extended his hand and the brothers shook hands, very solemnly on the part of the replica, with beaming delight on the part of Mr. Hannaford.

"Steady down, boy; steady down and join us," Mr. Hannaford earnestly entreated, holding Stingo's hand and gazing into his face with great fondness. But Stingo slowly shook his head, and turning to Lord Burdon again, raised his hat and after many severe throatings managed a husky repetition of "Proud!"

Mr. Hannaford heaved an astonishingly loud sigh, pulled himself together with a leg-and-cane crack that caused all the little 'orses to start, and addressed himself to business. Little master, he declared, had a proper eye for a proper little 'orse. The little black 'orse that little master had stroked might have been specially born

for his lordship's purpose; picked up at Bampton fair last spring, a trifle too stout and not quite the colouring for a circus little 'orse and trained to be the first of Stage Two: little gentlefolks' little 'orses.

Concluding this recommendation, Mr. Hannaford put his head outside the stable and roared "Jim!" in a voice that might have been heard at Little Letham; Stingo put his head out and throated "Jim!" in a husky whisper that nobody heard but himself; and presently there appeared a long, thin youth wearing a brimless straw hat that was in constant movement owing to an alarming habit of twitching his scalp.

"Fix him up and run him out," commanded Mr. Hannaford, jerking a thumb at the little black 'orse; "and keep your scalp steady, me lad, else you'll do yourself a ninjury." He glared very fiercely; and Jim, touching an eyebrow which a violent twitch had rushed up to the point that should have been covered by the brimless straw hat, took down a bridle and approached the little black 'orse with the air of one who anticipates some embarrassment.

Mr. Hannaford's stables looked on to a small enclosed paddock, much cut about with hoofs and marked in the centre by a deeply trodden ring, around which, as he explained, the little 'orses were put through their circus paces.

Rollo shyly held his father's hand; Stingo revolved slowly on his own axis the better to keep a surprised eye on Percival, who pranced and bounded with excitement; and presently the little black 'orse, with tossing head and delighted heels, was produced before them.

"Now!" said Mr. Hannaford, patting the little black 'orse with one hand and extending the other to Rollo. "Up you come, my little lordship. Nothing to be afraid

of. Only his fun that. Steady as a little lamb when you're on his back — perfectly safe, me lord," he assured Lord Burdon.

But Rollo hung back, nestling his hand deeper into his father's and flushing with nervous appeal into Lord Burdon's face. His riding in the Park did not accommodate the natural timidity of his nature to the adventures of a strange mount, and less so to the doubtful prospects that the spirit of the little black 'orse appeared to offer. Lord Burdon understood, and patted Rollo's hand. "Not feeling quite up to it, old man? Well, we'll ask Mr. Hannaford to send the pony over to the Manor, and try him there, eh?"

"Blest if you ain't right, me young lordship," declared Mr. Hannaford tactfully. "Never be hurried into trying a new little 'orse. That's the way. Jim shall bring him round for you, me lord, first thing in the morning. Walk him up the field, Jim, to let his lordship see how he moves."

Jim clicked his tongue, the little black 'orse bounded amain, and Percival, who had been watching with burning eyes, could control himself no longer. "Oh, let me!" Percival cried. "Just one tiny little ride! Lord Burdon, *please* let me! I *'treat* you to let me!"

"Why, you can't ride," Lord Burdon objected playfully.

"I could ride him *anywhere!*" Percival implored. "He knows me. Just look how he's looking at me. Oh, please — *please!*" and he ended with a shout of delight, for Lord Burdon nodded to Mr. Hannaford and Mr. Hannaford swung Percival from the ground into the saddle.

"Shorten up that stirrup-iron, Jim," said Mr. Hannaford, stuffing Percival's foot into the stirrup on his side.

"Catch hold this way, little master. Stick in with your knees. That's the way. Run him out, Jim."

The straw-hatted youth made a clutch at the bridle, the little black 'orse jerked up its little black head, and Percival jerked up the bridle and cried: "Let go! let go!" and kicked a stirruped foot at the straw-hatted youth and cried: "He *knows* me, I tell you!"

"Pocket Marvel," commented Stingo huskily, watching the struggle. "Pocket Marvel, if ever I saw one."

"Why, that's just the very words that I called him, bless my eighteen stun proper if it isn't!" cried Mr. Hannaford in huge delight; and simultaneously the straw-hatted youth, with a terrible cry and a tremendous jerk of the scalp, received a pawing hoof on his foot and relaxed his hold on the bridle.

Away went the little black 'orse and away went the Pocket Marvel bounding in the saddle like an india-rubber ball; shouting with delight; losing a stirrup; clutching at the saddle; saving himself by a miraculous twist as the little black 'orse circled at the top of the field; bumping higher and higher as the little black 'orse came gamely trotting back to them, and finally shooting headfirst into Mr. Hannaford's arms, as Stingo caught the bridle and the little black 'orse came to a stop.

Mr. Hannaford placed Percival on his legs and he stood by the little black 'orse's side, breathless, flushed, the centre of general congratulations and laughter, from the deep "Ho! Ho!" and terrible leg-and-cane cracks of Mr. Hannaford to the silent signals of appreciation indicated by the rapid oscillation of the brimless straw hat on the astonishing scalp movements of Jim.

"Well, I'm afraid I got off rather too quickly, you know," he announced.

"Not a bit of it!" Mr. Hannaford declared stoutly, rubbing that portion of his waistcoat into which Percival's head had cannoned. "You got off same as you stuck on; like a regular little Pocket Marvel, bless my eighteen stun proper if you didn't."

The Pocket Marvel went crimson with new pride and excitement. He made to turn eagerly to the little black 'orse again; and there occurred then an incident of which he thought nothing at the time, nor for many years, but which secreted itself in that strange storehouse of the brain where trivialities permanently root themselves and whence they stir, shake off the dust and emerge, when the impressions of far greater events are obliterated. As he stretched a hand to the bridle, he caught a glimpse of Rollo's face. Distress not far removed from tears was there. The boy was concealing himself behind his father. His sensitive nature caused him to feel that the laughing group, when it turned attention to him, would to his detriment compare him with this bold young junior; he shrank from that moment.

Percival turned away from the little black 'orse and ran to him. "Now it's your turn, Rollo. You see, he knew me from the beginning, and that's why he liked me to ride him. Now you try. I promise you I shall run by his side and then, you see, he'll know you're a friend of mine."

He took Rollo's hand and drew him forward. "Sure you'd like to, old chap?" Lord Burdon asked, and Rollo said; "Oh, yes," and mounted by himself, as he had been taught in London.

"There you are!" cried Percival, beaming up at him and clapping his hands with delight. "There you are! Now, then!" And he set off running alongside as he had undertaken, as the little black 'orse broke into a trot.

Once in the saddle, Rollo abandoned his fears and rode easily. The little black 'orse outpaced Percival's small legs, and Percival came running back and took Lord Burdon's hand and watched with eager eyes and squirmed with delight.

"He doesn't bump like I did, you see," he said. "Look how he turns him!" and he freed his hand and clapped and shouted: "Well done, Rollo!"

"'Pon my soul, Percival, you're a devilish good little beggar," said Lord Burdon; and a similar thought was in the minds of the brothers Hannaford when, the pony purchased, they watched the wagonette drive from the farm. "I shall save up and come with my Aunt Maggie and buy one too," Percival declared, giving his hand to Mr. Hannaford over the side of the trap. "In my money-box I've got three shillings already; so I should like to know what you think of that?"

"Pocket Marvel, that little master," commented Mr. Hannaford, as the wagonette turned out of sight.

Stingo made three husky attempts at speech and at length whispered: "Thought he was the young lordship when I first saw 'em."

Mr. Hannaford beamed with delight and extended his hand. "Why, that's just what I thought!" he declared; "bless my eighteen stun proper if it wasn't. Steady down, boy, steady down and join us."

But Stingo's handshake was limp, and he shook his head slowly.

II

Then there were the lessons with Miss Purdie. Very considerably less satisfactory, these, than the tearing excitements that the pony provided, yet having plenty of

fun for Percival's eager young mind; and increasing along a new path the intimacy between the two boys. Rollo was the more advanced; but his grounding! "Your grounding," as Miss Purdie would cry, "is shoc-*king!* Grounding is *everything! Look* at this sum! *What* is seven times twelve, sir? . . . then *why* have you put down a six? How *dare* you laugh, Percival? You are *worse!* Rollo, it's *no* good! You must begin at the *beginning.* Grounding is *everything!*"

Terribly frightening, Miss Purdie, when swept by her little storms. Rather like a little bird, Miss Purdie, with her sharp little glances from behind her spectacles. "*Don't* put your tongue out when you write, Percival! What would you think of me, if I moved my tongue from corner to corner every time I write, like that? *Don't* laugh at me, sir!"

"Well, it comes out by itself," Percival expostulates, "and I don't even know that it is out, you know; so I should like to know what you think of that?"

"I don't think any thing *about* it," says Miss Purdie, with a stamp of her little foot. "That *stu*-pid question of yours! *How* often have I told you not to use it?"

Very like a little bird, Miss Purdie, with her sharp little glances, with her nimble little hops to and fro, and with her perky little cockings of the head on this side and the other as she encourages an answer.

"Now the grammar lesson and I hope you've both prepared it. Gender of nouns. Masculine, Govern-*or.* Feminine?"

"Govern-*ess*," venture the boys, a trifle apprehensively.

"Good boys! Masculine, Sorcer-*er.* Feminine?"

"Sorcer-*ess*," says the chorus, gathering courage.

"Masculine, Cater-*er*. Feminine?"

"Cater-*ess*," bawls the chorus, thoroughly enjoying itself.

"*Not* so loud! Masculine, Murder-*er*. Feminine?"

"Murder-*ess*," howls the chorus, recklessly delighted.

"Good boys! Now be careful! Prosecutor? Take time over it. Masculine, Prosecut-*or*. Feminine?"

"Prosecutr-*ess!*" thunders the chorus, plunging to destruction on the swing of the thing; and "Oh, you *stu*-pids! you *stu*-pids!" cries Miss Purdie. "You intol-er-able *stu*-pids!" and the unhappy chorus hangs its head and cowers beneath the little storm it has let loose.

Delightfully appreciative, though, Miss Purdie, when the "break" of ten minutes comes and when the boys gorge plum-cake and milk and make her positively quiver with recitals of the terrible gallops on the pony; and delightfully concerned, too, when, as happens once or twice, Rollo is discovered to have a headache and is made to lie on the sofa in a rug and with a hot-water bottle, while the lessons are continued with Percival in fierce whispers and hissed "*stu*-pids." Delightfully inconsequent, moreover, Miss Purdie, who at the end of an especially exasperating morning, when Hunt is heard with the pony outside the gate, will suddenly cry: "Well, *go* away then, you thorough little *stu*-pids; *go* away!" and will drive them to the door and then at once will go into ecstatics over the pony and hurry Percival in for sugar, and quake with terror while the pony nibbles it from her hand, and stand and wave at her gate while they go flying down the road, one in the saddle, the other gasping behind.

Delightfully appreciative, Miss Purdie, and they learn to love her for all their terrible fear of her.

Percival, Miss Purdie finds, is the more affectionate — also the more troublesome. Rollo takes his cue from Percival and acts accordingly. "*You* are the ringleader!" cries Miss Purdie, stabbing a forefinger at Percival on the fearful morrow of the day on which truant was played — whose morning had seen Miss Purdie running between her house and her gate like a distressed hen abandoned by her chickens; whose afternoon had seen the alarm communicated to Burdon Old Manor and to "Post Offic"; and whose evening had discovered the disconsolate return to the village of two travel-stained and weary figures. "*You* are the ringleader in everything, and I don't know whether you ought to be more ashamed or *you*" — and she turns from the ringleader to stab her finger at the ring, as represented by Rollo — "or *you*, for allowing yourself to be led away by one so much younger."

"I've told you," protests Percival, "I've told you again and again we got lost; so I should like to know what you think of that?"

"*Don't* use that *abom*-inable phrase, sir! If you hadn't gone off — tempted Rollo to go off — you wouldn't have got lost, would you?"

Percival beams at her in his disarming manner. "Well, you see, we saw a fox and went after it and kept on seeing it and *then* found we were lost; so I should like —"

"*Don't* argue. I tell you, you are the *ring*-leader!"

She pauses and glares. "I should like to tell you," says the ringleader, still beaming, "about a very funny thing we saw. We saw —"

"*Stand* in the corner!" cries Miss Purdie. "*Stand* in the corner! You are incorrigible!" and she turns to Rollo with "Geography, sir!" in a voice that causes him to tremble.

III

Certainly Percival is the leader. He has the instinct of leadership. It is to be noted in the carriage and in the demeanour of his vigorous young person. A sturdy way of standing he has: squarely, with his round chin up, his head thrown back, his knees always braced, his arms never hanging limply but always slightly flexed at the elbows as though alert for action, his eyes widely opened, his gaze upwards and about him with the challenging air of one who expects entertainments to arise and would be quick to greet them. He is rarely still; he is rarely silent. A brisk way of movement he has; a high young voice; a compelling laugh with a clear note of "Ha! Ha! Ha!" as though the matter that tickles him tickles him with the boniest knuckles wherever he is ticklish. He has the instinct of leadership. When he is with Rollo and an affair arises, he does not suggest a plan of action; he immediately acts. On their rambles, when an obstacle or an emergency is discovered, it instantly arouses in him a reflex action by which vigorously, and without estimate of its difficulties, it is attacked. "You are so thoughtless, Percival, so thoughtless!" Aunt Maggie cries when he explains a mired and dripping state with "I jumped the ditch and found I couldn't jump."

"Well, but I wanted to get across, you see," Percival explains.

"If you had looked first you would have seen you couldn't get across."

"Well, but I *did* get across!"

"You didn't; you fell in, you stupid little boy."

"But I got *across*," beams Percival; and Aunt Maggie undoes her scolding by kissing him. She has marked this impetuous and determined spirit in him; and she knows

it for the "I hold" spirit that is his by right of birth; one day he will present it to Lady Burdon.

He had the instinct of leadership. At first, in the excursions with Rollo, he unconsciously expected in Rollo a spirit equal to and similar with his own. At first, when he ran suddenly, or suddenly took a great jump, or set off at a quick trot towards some distant excitement, he expected to find Rollo at his side and was surprised to turn and find him hanging back, timid or tired. Very shortly he accepted the difference between them and emphasized that he was leader. It became natural to him that, with the action of starting to run or of storming a stout hedge, he should give to Rollo a hand that would aid him along or pull him through. It became natural, when a difficult place was reached, to release the hand with a little confident movement that implied "Stay;" to rush the obstacle; somehow to scramble to the further side, and then turn and cry directions and encouragement, ending always with "I 'll catch you, you know; you 'll be all right."

And as the weeks went on, the complement of this hardy spirit became natural to Rollo. Percival put out the hand of aid; the hand that desired aid was always ready. Rollo's hand acquired the habit of relying on Percival for physical support; his mind came to depend on Percival for moral benefit. However they were employed, he took his note from his leader. If Percival chose to be idle at their lessons, Rollo also would be inattentive and mischievous. On the days when Percival was immense in his promises to work hard, Rollo would sedulously apply himself. Percival led; he followed. Percival called the tune; Rollo danced to it. Percival stretched the hand; Rollo took it.

CHAPTER V

THE WORLD AS SHOWMAN: ALL THE JOLLY FUN

I

THE stay at Burdon Old Manor came to an end; it had been so productive of health and happiness in Rollo, he became, as years went on, so much more and more devoted to Percival, that it was made the beginning of regular visits. The Manor continued to doze for the most part under the care of Mrs. Housekeeper Ferris, with Mr. Librarian Amber's library the only room that had no dust sheets about the furniture; but there were periodic openings: always a visit at Easter before the London season began, always a visit in August reaching into October when the London season was ended.

The visits marked the fullest times of Percival's life, as they marked the happiest of Rollo's; but life was steadily and joyously filled for Percival in these days, and he with a zest for it that carried him ardently along the hours.

The years were passing; he grew apace. It was a period, the villagers told one another, of rare proper weather: the winters hard with all the little hamlets tethered along Plowman's Ridge sometimes cut off for days together by heavy falls of snow; the springs most gentle and most radiant, escaping with a laugh from Winter's bondage and laughing down the lanes and up the hedgerows and through the fields, where every mother, from earth that mothered all, was fruitful of her kind;

the summers glorious, with splendid days joining hands with splendid days to form a stately chain of sunshine through the warmer months.

Rare proper weather with the energy of its period in every hour, and Percival that energy's embodiment. He grew properly, the villagers said, and knew without a second glance what figure it was that went scudding along the Down in the young mornings, and knew without a second thought whose voice came singing to them as they stooped in their fields or trudged behind their herds. He grew lustily; lissom of limb, as might be seen; eager and finely turned of face, having an air and a wide eye that caused chance tourists to turn and look again; very big of spirit, as those knew who had the handling of him.

"He's getting that independent there's no doing a thing with him," stormed Honor one day, coming with Percival (both very red in the face) to lay a passage of arms for arbitrament before Aunt Maggie.

"Oh, Percival! And Honor is so kind to you!"

"I know, I know; but she tries to *rule* me, Aunt Maggie!"

"And ruling you want," Honor cried, "as your Aunt Maggie well knows. Spare the pickle and spoil the rod!"

"You've got it wrong!" said Percival with scornful triumph, and after he had stalked away, his head thrown up in an action that Aunt Maggie well remembered in Roly, she sought to placate Honor with thoughts that were frequently coming to her in those days. "He is getting big, Honor. I think we forget how he is growing. We mustn't keep him in too tightly."

Then there was Miss Purdie. "To my face!" cried Miss Purdie, fluttering into "Post Offic" one afternoon, "to my face he called the sum a *beastly* sum — the sum, mind you, I had set him myself! A *beastly* sum!" and

then completely spoilt the horror of it by sighing and winding up, "but he is such a *sweet.* So lovable! So merry!"

"He's growing, you see," joined Aunt Maggie.

"Of *course,* he is," agreed Miss Purdie. "It's just his spirit. He's so *manly!*" and she gave herself a little shake and said: "Oh, I like a *manly* boy!"

Still, the truculence of character that had brought her warring down to "Post Offic" remained to be settled. Moreover, the boy's mind was developing outside the range of Miss Purdie's primers and exercise books. "He wants *Latin,*" said Miss Purdie. "He wants *algebra.* He wants *Euclid!*" and the ladies decided that his tuition had better be handed over to Miss Purdie's brother, who could supply these correctives. They shook hands on it and agreed that Mr. Purdie should take over the duties on the morrow. On the doorstep Miss Purdie repeated the necessity with terrible emphasis: "He wants *Latin!* He wants *algebra!* But I shall miss our lessons together! Oh, dear, how I shall miss them!"

She hurried home with little sniffs which she strove to check by repeating very fiercely: "He wants *Latin!*"

II

Percival took up with immense zest the new freedom from petticoat control and the new regimen of lessons. He liked the new subjects; and it was notable in him that he carried into the exercise of his tasks the same quickness and determination with which he entered upon — and completed — all pleasanter affairs that came to his hand. Mr. Purdie, for his part, was enchanted. Mr. Purdie was plump and soft, with lethargic ways and pronounced timidity of character. In his youth Mr. Purdie had been

called to the Bar. A very small legacy came to him thereafter, and his lymphatic nature led him at once to abandon town life, to go to sloth at his ease with his sister at Burdon village. He was vastly attracted by Percival. Very shortly after their introduction as master and pupil, he came to Aunt Maggie with the suggestion that Percival might spend with him some leisure as well as the school-hours. "A boy can be taught in his play as well as his work," he announced in his pompous manner. "At Percival's age, and as he grows, there are things in which only a man can guide him." He gave one of his shrill, absurd chuckles: "And I think Master Percival likes me. Eh, Percival?"

Percival eyed him doubtfully. He could not see stout and soft Mr. Purdie contributing much entertainment to his rambles. "Well, if you bring your tricycle, we might have some fun," he admitted.

Ah, these were the happy days. Happy, happy time! There was fun in alarming Mr. Purdie during their walks by taking him across fields that had fierce cows; by climbing trees with the plump tutor imploring beneath; by pretending to go out of depth when bathing in Fir-Tree Pool, with the plump tutor beseeching from the bank like an agitated hen that has hatched ducklings. There was particular fun in the tricycle.

The tricycle was an immense affair of remote construction, having the steering-wheel attached by a bar behind and manipulated by handles on either side of the seat that required almost as much winding as a clock — "twiddling" Percival called it — when the machine was to be deflected from a straight passage. Percival's legs were too short for the treadles, Mr. Purdie's too soft for propulsion up even the gentlest incline. Tricycle excursions took, therefore, the form of laborious pushing,

with inordinate perspiration on the part of Mr. Purdie, until the brow of a hill was gained, when Percival would balance upon the steering wheel bar, Mr. Purdie in considerable trepidation on the seat, and away they would go with delighted shoutings from Percival — legs dangling, hands clutching the plump tutor's coat — and anguished entreaties of "Steady! steady! Don't touch my arms! Don't touch my arms!" from Mr. Purdie, back-pedalling tremendously, clutching at the brake, winding at the handles. Then the laborious ascent of the next slope, Mr. Purdie dripping at every pore, Percival crimson in the face and carrying on a long argument: "If you'd only *work* when we get near the bottom and not use that rotten brake, we'd get halfway up and not have this awful *pushing!*"

"Well, kindly do not push *me*," says Mr. Purdie, very hot.

Happy, happy time! Disaster came on the day on which there entered Mr. Purdie's eye the fly that he always dreaded. Mr. Purdie in the seat was back-pedalling with immense caution down Five Furlong Hill; Percival on the steering bar behind was peering ahead round the plump tutor's ample girth and at intervals urging: "Now let her go!"

It was the fly that let her go. Whack! came the fly into Mr. Purdie's eye. "Whoa!" cried Mr. Purdie. "Bother! dear me! Whoa!" Up went Mr. Purdie's knees in the twitch of pain; up came his hand to his tortured eye; round went the released pedals; forward shot the tricycle.

"Hurrah!" cried Percival. "Well done! Ripping of you!"

Mr. Purdie, between agony of his eye and terror for his safety, gave a shrill cry of dismay; took a grab at

the brake and a grab back at his eye; received two terrible blows on the backs of his legs that fumbled wildly for the whizzing treadles, and barked out: "Brake! Brake! Fly in my eye!"

"Which eye?" Percival shouted, enjoying the speed enormously.

The alarmed tutor bundled his words in a heap the better to get them out and arrest the catastrophe that threatened.

"Catchabrakeandontbesilly! Catchabrakeabekilled!"

They whizzed!

Percival bawled: "We don't want the brake! I can't reach the brake! I like it! We're simply whizzing! Mind your legs!" His cap was gone. His hair fluttered in the rushing wind. His face was crimson with excited glee. His clear laughter on its strong note of "Ha! Ha! Ha!" rose high above the rattling of all the machine's vitals and the cries of the agonised bearer of the fly. He clung tightly to the podgy waist and shouted: "Ha! Ha! Ha! We're whizzing! We're whizzing!"

Mr. Purdie took another six hammers on his legs and struck a note of new alarm.

"I'm blind, you know! I can't see! I can't steer!"

"A straight road!" Percival bawled. "Look out, though! A corner coming!"

"How can I look out? Draggle your legs on the ground!"

"Twiddle to the left!" Percival bellowed. "Ha! Ha! Ha! Twiddle, Mr. Purdie, twiddle!"

Mr. Purdie twiddled frantically; the tricycle outraced his efforts. "Look out for yourself!" from Percival, and with a loud and exceeding bitter cry from Mr. Purdie, the machine plunged at the hedge, planted Mr. Purdie very firmly into the midst, shot Percival firmly on top

of him, took a violent somersault across the ditch that skirted the hedge, and poised itself above them.

Mr. Purdie's last despairing cry cut sharply across Percival's peals of laughter — then the crash. The fluttering beat of wings as a cloud of chaffinches, terrified by this amazing avalanche, burst from the floor of the wood beyond the hedge, then peal on peal of laughter again from Percival.

In muffled tones from the depth of the hedge: "It is a miracle we are not killed. Where are you, Percival?"

Percival checked his mirth sufficiently to reply: "Well, I don't know *where* I am! My head is down here, but where my legs are I don't know."

"One of them is under me and hurting me terribly. Move, please."

Between the peals of laughter: "I can't move, Mr. Purdie. I'm practically standing on my head, you know."

"I don't know anything about it. My face is almost in something highly unpleasant — a dead bird, I think. Please stop that laughter and try to do something. The odour here is most noisome."

"Well, but I can't stop laughing. Did you see us shoot?"

"Please try to control yourself. I did not see us shoot."

A mighty effort causes Percival's head and shoulders to come up with a jerk; Mr. Purdie feels the weight of pupil and tricycle removed from his back, and there follows another crash and further yells of laughter.

In muffled agony from the hedge: "Now what has happened?"

"Well, I'm bothered if I haven't fallen again! I've fallen out, though."

Out of the depths: "Percival! Percival! Don't be such a silly little boy! Pull me out!"

"Well, I'm all mixed up in this awful trike, you know. Now, I'm up!"

"Pray pull me, then. I am retching with this noisome smell."

"Well, there's nothing to pull!" cries Percival, plunging round the tremendous stern that sticks out of the hedge. "Your trousers are simply *tight!*"

Out of the depths: "Tch! Tch! Push me sideways, then."

The mammoth stern is pushed sideways and hauled backways, and presently begins to rise, and presently the stout tutor is ponderously disgorged from the hedge, and staggers forth with grunts and moans, and collapses on the roadside, feet in ditch, very bedraggled and unfortunate looking.

"Don't think I'm laughing at you," Percival says. "I'm really very sorry for you. But you're not hurt, you know. Let me rub you down with leaves."

"I am terribly shaken. Do not touch me for a few minutes, please."

"Is the fly still in your eye?"

"I don't know where the fly is."

"Your trousers are awfully torn."

"Be silent, please. I am dazed."

He remains dazed when at last they begin to trudge home, the wrecked tricycle left for a cart. But at the top of the hill that plunged them to disaster, the infectious spurts of laughter at his side challenge his self-esteem and he sets out to sound his reputation in Percival's regard.

"I think I steered rather well, considering I couldn't see."

Percival is always generous: "Splendidly! Oh, dear, I'm aching with laughing!"

"I was only afraid for you, Percival."

"We whizzed, you know! We simply whizzed!"

Mr. Purdie glances back down the hill and shudders to have whizzed it. "Were you laughing all the way down?"

"Anybody would laugh at a whizz like that."

The plump tutor has a close acquaintance with one person who would not. The remark pricks him and he finds a comforting answer. "Only very silly people laugh at danger."

"Well, I didn't know it was danger," said Percival; and Mr. Purdie first looks at him thoughtfully and then gives one of his shrill, absurd chuckles.

III

Happy, happy time! There were the visits to Mr. Hannaford, always made on a whole holiday because an early start was necessary, where the little 'orse farm was progressing famously and where Percival was made quite extraordinarily welcome. Terrible leg-and-cane cracks would announce in which quarter of the farm Mr. Hannaford was to be found, and Percival would discover Mr. Hannaford watching a little circus 'orse at exercise, or watching the builders at work in the brick stables that were slowly displacing the line of sheds, and watching all the time to the accompaniment of bellowing instructions punctuated by leg-and-cane cracks of astounding volume.

Percival would plant himself squarely by Mr. Hannaford's side in Mr. Hannaford's position — legs apart, head thrown back — and would eagerly follow the pro-

ceedings until Mr. Hannaford suddenly would observe him and would cry in a voice the whole farm might hear: "Why, it's the little Pocket Marvel! Bless my eighteen stun proper if it ain't! However long a you been there, little master?"

Percival, beaming all over his face and putting his small hand into the tremendous shake of Mr. Hannaford's shoulder of mutton fist: "Only about ten minutes, thank you, Mr. Hannaford. Don't you mind me, you know. I like watching."

"Ah, and I've got something for you to watch," Mr. Hannaford would say. "Now you come over here with me. Got that little lordship with you?"

"Not come back yet," Percival would reply, capering along, tremendously happy. "How are you going along, Mr. Hannaford? Properly?"

"Properly to rights! Look at that now!" And with a terrible leg-and-cane crack Mr. Hannaford would pause before the new stables and call Percival's attention to some new feature that had arisen since his last visit. "Names on the doors, d'you see? 'Crocker's' on that door, 'Maddox's' on this door. Do a deal in little 'orses with Crocker's circus; take your gross profit; set aside share of expenses; set aside wear and tear; set aside emergency fund; take your net profit; build your stable; call it Crocker's. Same with Maddox: deal, gross, share, wear, emergency, net, stable — call it Maddox! What d'you think of that for a notion?"

"Why, I call it jolly fine, Mr. Hannaford," Percival replies. "I call that a proper notion. Reminds you how you did it, doesn't it?"

"Why, that's just exactly what it does do!" cries Mr. Hannaford, enormously delighted. "Just the very notion of it, bless my eighteen stun proper if it ain't!

Now you come along over here." And Mr. Hannaford would leg-and-cane crack, and Percival would trot and chatter, over to another marvel, where a similar performance would be gone through, owner and spectator tremendously happy, and both profoundly serious.

Mr. Hannaford would usually propose lunch after this. Mr. Hannaford permitted no women in his establishment; but the long, low-roofed dining-room in the old farmhouse was kept at a shining cleanliness, and the meal was invitingly cooked, by a one-armed man of astoundingly fierce appearance and astonishingly mild disposition, who answered to the names of Ob and Diah accordingly as Mr. Hannaford preferred the former or latter half of the Obadiah to which the one-armed man was entitled, and who had left the greater part of his missing arm in the lion's cage he had attended when travelling with Maddox's Monster Menagerie and Royal Circus.

Three places were always set at the table when Percival visited. One for Mr. Hannaford at one end, one at the other end for brother Stingo — "in case," as Mr. Hannaford would say — and one on Mr. Hannaford's right for Percival. There was a tremendous silver tankard of ale for Mr. Hannaford, a similar tankard for Percival — requiring both hands and containing milk — and always, when Mr. Hannaford raised the dish-cover, there developed from the cloud of steam a plump chicken which Mr. Hannaford called chick*un* and Percival chick*ing* and which they both fell upon with quite remarkable appetites.

"Well, it's a most astonishing thing to me," Percival would say when the cover went up, and the chicken settled out of the steam. "Most amazing! You know I like chicking better than anything, and every time I

come you just happen to have chicking for dinner! Most amazing to me, you know!"

And Mr. Hannaford would lay down the carving knife and fork and stare at the chicken and say: "Well, it is a chickun again, so it is, bless my eighteen stun proper if it ain't!" and would give a tremendous wink at Ob in order to enjoy with him the joke arising from the fact that directly Percival was sighted on the farm a messenger was sent to Ob to prepare the meal that Percival liked best.

Then they would eat away, and pull away at the colossal tankards, and Percival would always make a point of saying: "Stingo not home?"

A long pull at the tankard and a heavy sigh from Mr. Hannaford: "Not just yet, little master. Still restless, I'm afraid. Still restless."

And Percival, in the old phrase and with the air of a grandfather: "Well, he'll settle down, you know. He'll settle down."

"Why, that's just what I say!" Mr. Hannaford would exclaim, immensely comforted. "Settle down — of course he will! Just what I'm always telling him, bless my eighteen stun proper if it ain't!"

Always the same jolly lunch, always the same mingled seriousness and jolly fun, always the same jokes. Percival did not know that much of it was carefully planned by Mr. Hannaford that he might enjoy the fullest relish of the Pocket Marvel's visit. There was the great chicken joke, there was also the killing joke for the production of which by Percival Mr. Hannaford would dawdle lunch to an inordinate length.

At length it would come: "Nothing I can have a ride on, I suppose, Mr. Hannaford?" Percival would say with careful carelessness.

"Never a norse fit for it," Mr. Hannaford would reply, equally off-hand.

A heavy sigh from Percival: "Oh, dear! Sure, I suppose?"

"Certain! Got a little brown 'orse — but there, you'd never ride him."

"I bet I would! I bet I would!"

Mr. Hannaford, looking terribly fierce and in a very violent voice: "Bet you wouldn't!"

"Try me, then! Only try me!"

And Mr. Hannaford would bounce up and seize his cane, and they would rush off, and the saddle would be put on the little brown 'orse, and Percival would mount him and gallop him and cry "You see! You see!" And Mr. Hannaford would pretend huge amazement and declare that Percival was a proper little Pocket Marvel, bless his eighteen stun proper if he wasn't.

Once or twice Stingo would be there, and then the jolly fun would be jollier than ever; and in the evening Mr. Hannaford's gig with the big black mare would come around and the brothers would labour up into the seat and Percival would squeeze in between them and they would let him drive and he would pop the mare along at a lashing speed and there would be the highest good-fellowship. He would be set down at the top of Five Furlong Hill — nothing would induce Mr. Hannaford to come into the village where women might be met. "Well, good night, Mr. Hannaford; good night, Mr. Stingo. Thank you most awfully for all your kindness to me. I hope I'll come again soon."

The brothers would usually wait until he reached the turning to the village; setting up, the one a husky shout, and the other a terrible bellow, in reply to the faint "Good night!" that came to them through the dusk.

"I never in all my life took to nothing, not even a little 'orse, like I have to that little master," Mr. Hannaford would say. "Never seen such a proper one, never."

And Stingo, with painful huskiness: "Ought to ha' been a little lordship!"

"Why, that's just exactly what I say," Mr. Hannaford would reply, enormously pleased. "Bless my eighteen stun proper if it isn't!"

IV

Happy, happy time! There were the visits to mild old Mr. Amber in the library at Burdon Old Manor. Strongest contrast, the delights here, to those enjoyed among the little 'orses. Strongest contrast, mild old Mr. Amber with his stooping shoulders and his gentle ways, to tremendous Mr. Hannaford with his lusty back and his vigorous habits.

But the same eager welcome: "Well, well, Master Percival, this is indeed a pleasant surprise! And we are just sitting down to our tea — and I declare Mrs. Ferris has sent us some strawberry jam! Now if that isn't too fortunate I don't know what is!"

"Well, it's awfully jolly," Percival agrees. "Mrs. Ferris makes very nice strawberry jam, doesn't she?"

In the act of pouring tea, mild old Mr. Amber sets down the pot and emphasises with his glasses. "My dear sir — my dear Percival, she makes the very best strawberry jam! Mrs. Ferris has made that strawberry jam for forty years — to our certain knowledge, for-ty years."

Percival's rounded eyes show his appreciation of this consistent industry. "Must have made a lot," is his comment.

"Tons," says Mr. Amber. "My dear sir — my dear Percival, I should say — tons." He stabs the glasses at his listener. "And every berry, sir, every single berry, wet season or dry, from our own gardens!"

It always comes back to that with Mr. Amber. The old Manor, the House of Burdon, is his world and his life, and he is mightily jealous you shall know their quality.

There is generally a little interlude of this kind in the course of the visit. Its effect stays for a few minutes, Mr. Amber slowly repeating to himself "every berry — every single berry, sir," in the tone of one impressively warning against any challenge of his statement; and then he simmers down and recollects that his visitor is the Percival who occupies a large portion of his heart. He likes to take Percival's hand. He likes to feel that warm young grasp within his own chilly old palm. He likes to lead the boy and feel those sturdy young fingers twitch to the excitement of what tales he can tell or what treasures he can show.

"Now what have we got to show you in our shelves this evening? Nothing much, we fear. Oh, yes, we have, though! Those folios — we've rearranged them so as to fill the ninth and tenth in this tier. That was your suggestion, wasn't it? I agree, you know, I quite agree. It's an improvement."

"Keeps them stiffer," says Percival, head on one side, rather proud.

"Just exactly what it does! Keeps them stiffer. Lessens the strain. We ought to have thought of that, Percival. We reproach ourselves there, you know."

There is a tinge of the self-reproach in his voice, and Percival hastens with: "Of course you would have done

it yourself, as you said, but you get into your ways, don't you?"

"Well, we do," agrees Mr. Amber, very comforted. "That's just what it is — we get into our ways."

At other times when Percival comes to the library, there is no answer to his knock on the door. He turns the handle very gently; pokes in his head very quietly; peers all about the apartment; cannot see Mr. Amber; enters very cautiously; and presently espies him perched high aloft on one of the wheeled book-ladders, sitting cross-legged, catalogue on knee, pencil in hand, brow puckered in mental labour.

Then Percival closes the door behind him, so that there shall be scarcely the faintest click, and gives a tiny cough and says: "Very busy, Mr. Amber?"

" 'M-'m," says Mr. Amber, wagging his head, waving the pencil and frowning horribly. " 'M-'m!"

Percival tiptoes with enormous caution to the other ladder; wheels it to a shelf where he has found entertainment; selects his book; perches himself; and for an hour or more the two, each on his ladder, the child and the man, the lissom young form and the withered old figure, sit high among the books, entranced among the worlds that books discover.

" 'M-'m!" says Mr. Amber at intervals, frantically waving.

"Only coughed," explains Percival. "Only that choking, you know. It —"

" 'M-'m! 'M-'m!" and they bury themselves again.

That is the usual course. Once or twice there have been conversations across the room from the tops of the ladders. Percival has looked up from his book to find Mr. Amber turned towards him and regarding him with eyes that do not appear to see his smile of greeting.

"Mr. Amber, is there anything funny about me that you look at me so?"

Mr. Amber will start as though he had been dreaming. "Funny? Eh? Why, no, Percival; nothing funny at all."

"If it is my boots, they are quite clean. I gave them twelve wipes each, like you told me."

"It's not your boots."

Silence between them.

"Funny us two sitting up here like this, like two mountains in the sea. Rather jolly, isn't it?"

"It recalls to me," says Mr. Amber, "another little boy who used to sit up there just as you sit. . . . In this dim light . . . there are ways you have, Percival . . ."

Silence again. Twilight gathering in the corners of the vast room. A moth softly thudding the window-pane. There is something in the atmosphere that seems to hold Percival. At "Post Offic" he likes the lamps to be lit when dusk draws down; here there is a feeling of gentleness about him, with curious half-thoughts and with half-familiar gropings and stretchings of the shadows. "Thinking without thinking, as if I was in some one else who was thinking," he has described it to Aunt Maggie.

"Your voice, too," says Mr. Amber suddenly.

Percival knows what is in Mr. Amber's mind. "Thinking of your young lordship, aren't you, Mr. Amber?"

"He used to sit there," Mr. Amber replies. "In this dim light . . . seeing you there . . ."

Silence again. Twilight wreathing from the corners across the ceiling; shadows grouping and moving in new fantasies; soft thuddings of the moth as though a shadow beat to enter.

Percival stretches a hand, and against the window's light perceives a shadow he has watched drift caressingly about his fingers.

Mr. Amber, little above a whisper, peering through the gloom: "Why do you stretch your hand so, my lord?"

"I'm touching a shadow that's come right up to me;" and then Percival realises the last words, and laughs and says: "You called me 'my lord!' — you did really, Mr. Amber!"

"God bless me!" says Mr. Amber, shaking himself — "God bless me, we are getting the shadows in our brains. Come down and watch me light the lamps."

V

Happy, happy time! Best of all when the family is at the Old Manor and when the friendship with Rollo can be taken up where it was left, to be deepened and to be discovered more than ever fruitful of delights. The boys are older now. Childish games are done with; very serious talks (so they believe) take the place of the chatter and the "pretending" of earlier days: they discuss affairs, mostly arising from adventures in the books they read; there has been a general election, and they agree that the Liberals are awful rotters; there has been one of the little wars, and they kindle together to the glory of British arms and wish they might be Young Buglers and be thanked by the general before the whole regiment like the heroes of Mr. Henty's books.

Percival calls the tune, starts the discussions, constructs the adventures. Rollo follows the lead, leaning on the quicker mind just as he relies on the stronger arm and the speedier foot when they are on their rambles together. It is Rollo who throws the acorn that hits

the stout farm boy driving a milk cart beneath them, as they perch in a tree. It is Percival who scrambles down responsive to the insults of the enraged boy, and takes a most fearful battering that the stout boy's stout arms are able to inflict.

"I ought to have fought him," Rollo says half-tearfully, with shamed and shuddering glances at the bloody handkerchief held to the suffering nose, the lumped forehead and the blackened eye. "He said the one that hit him. It was my shot."

Percival, in terrible fury, muffled from behind the handkerchief: "How could you fight him? Dash those great clodhopping arms of his! A mile long! I'll have another go at him, I swear I will."

It is Rollo who cries: "Percival, it will kill us!" when the ram they have annoyed comes with a fourth shattering crash against the boards of the pigsty to which they have fled for safety. It is Percival who cries: "Run, when he sees us!" whips over the palisade, springs across the field, and takes the tail-end of an appalling batter as he hurls himself through the far gate.

"How ever could you dare?" Rollo asks, joining him in the road. "Has he hurt you frightfully?"

"How could you have escaped?" says Percival, limping. "He'd have got you in that sty. I knew I could beat him. Dash the brute, it stings! There's the kind of stick I want! I'll teach him manners!"

It is Rollo who gives an appealing look at Percival when Lord Burdon starts them in a race for sixpence. It is Percival who whispers as they run: "We'll make it a dead heat."

"It was awfully decent of you, Percival," Rollo exclaims, as they go to spend the prize at Mrs. Minnifie's sweet shop.

"Oh, it's rotten beating one another when people are looking on," Percival replies. "I vote for lemonade as well, don't you?"

It is the spirit between them that had its first evidence on the day when the visit was made to Mr. Hannaford to purchase the little black 'orse. Then Rollo hung back while Percival jumped to ride; then Percival brought him forward, encouraging him, to taste the fun. So now, as the years sunder their natures more sharply, and as affection more strongly bridges the gulf, the more sharply does the one lead, the other follow; the more naturally does the one support, the other rely.

Everybody notices it: Aunt Maggie, who only smiles; Lady Burdon, who says: "Rollo, Percival's a regular little father to you, it seems to me. Don't let him rule you, you know. Remember what you are, Rollo mine." Even Egbert Hunt notices it. Mr. Hunt is still attached to Rollo's person. Sick yedaches trouble him less frequently; but his hatred of tyrangs has deepened with the increasing tenure of his servitude. He spends less of his wages on vegules; much of it on socialistic literature of an inflammatory nature; but he never forgets the sympathy of Percival in the vegule days, and he is strongly joined with all those who, meeting the boy, have a note stirred by his sunny nature.

"Always does me good to see you," Mr. Hunt says one day. "Something about you. He'll never be a slave who works for you."

"Well, who's going to work for me?" Percival inquires.

"The point!" says Mr. Hunt with impressive gloom. "The very point." He fumbles in his pocket and produces thumbed papers, just as he fumbled and produced vegules at an earlier day. "It's in the lowlier" — he

consults a paper — "in the lowlier strata that you find the men a man can follow, but the men that can't lead owing to the heel of the tyrang. It's the Bloodsuckers we got to serve." He indicates the paper: "Bloodsuckers, they call 'em here."

"Silly rot," says Percival.

"Ah, you're young," Mr. Hunt returns. "You're young. You'll learn different when they begin to sap your blood for you. You're a higher strata than me, Master Percival. Benificent influence of education, you've had. But you're under the Bloodsuckers. Squeeze you out like an orindge, they will, and throw yer away. Me one day, you another." He indicated the paper again. "There's a strong bit here called 'Squeezed Orindges.' Makes yer boil."

"I'm boiling already," says Percival. "It's a jolly hot day. If you don't like being what you are, I wonder you don't be something else."

"No good," Mr. Hunt tells him. "Out of one tyrang's heel and under another. We've got to suffer and endure, us orindges, until the day when they are swept away like chaff before the wind."

Percival is rather interested: "Well, who's going to sweep them? and sweep whom?"

"Ah!" says Mr. Hunt darkly. "Who? Makes yer boil."

"Well, I shouldn't worry, Hunt," says Percival, in the old "Have you got one of your poor sick yedaches?" tone. "I shouldn't, really. I feel angry sometimes, but you've only got to have a game of something, you know. There's Rollo! Come on down and help us to build that raft on Fir-Tree Pool. We'll have a jolly time. Rollo! Hunt's going to help us, so we can get that big plank down now! Come on, Hunt!"

He bounds away towards Rollo, and Mr. Hunt, watching before he starts to follow, says: "Ah, pity there's not more like you! You ought to ha' been one of them." He scowls horribly in the direction of Lady Burdon, who is waving to the boys from the door. "One o' them, you ought to ha' been. Makes yer boil!"

CHAPTER VI

JAPHRA AND IMA AND SNOW-WHITE-AND-ROSE-RED

I

AND there were three new friends who contributed to this happy, happy time and who came vitally to contribute to later years. There were Japhra and Ima, who lived in a yellow caravan that was sometimes attached to that Maddox's Monster Menagerie and Royal Circus with which Mr. Hannaford traded in little 'orses; and there was Dora, whose mother was that Mrs. Espart of Abbey Royal at Upabbot over the Ridge who — as Miss Oxford had told Lady Burdon — did not send her little girl to lessons with Miss Purdie because of the post-office little boy.

Percival first met Japhra and Ima on a day not long after the end of Rollo's first visit, when — his playmate gone — he was temporarily a little lonely. He came upon them by Fir-Tree Pool, stepped through the belt of trees that surround the pool and halted in much delight at the entrancing sight his eyes gave him.

Here was a yellow caravan with little curtained windows, a thing most pregnant of mysteries to eight-years-old. A big white horse, unharnessed from the van, was cropping the turf. There was an iron pot hanging above a jolly fire of sticks. On the steps of the van a girl of about Percival's own age sat knitting. She was olive of face, with long, black hair; her legs were bare and they looked very long, Percival thought. By the fire, astride of a

felled tree trunk, was a little man with a very brown face that was marked like a sailor's with many puckered little lines. He had a tight-lipped mouth with a short pipe that seemed a natural part of it, and he wore a long jacket and had a high hat of some rough, brown fur. He was reading a book; and as Percival stood watching, he put a finger to mark his place and looked up slowly as though he had known Percival was there but wished to read to a certain point before interrupting himself.

He looked up and Percival noticed that his eyes, set in that brown, puckered face, were uncommonly bright. "Welcome, little master," said he. "All the luck!"

"Hullo!" said Percival. "Excuse me staring. This is funny to me, you know."

"Quiet, though," said the little man, his eyes twinkling; "and that's the best thing in life."

Percival came up to him, vastly attracted. "Do you live in that van?"

"That's where I live, little master — Ima and I."

Percival stared at the girl on the steps, who stared back at him and then smiled. "Ima? That's a funny name," he said.

"Maybe she's a funny girl," said the little man, twinkling more than ever.

Percival took it quite seriously. "Well, her legs are long," he said appraisingly.

"They can run, though, little master," said the girl. She had a curiously soft voice, Percival noticed. But he was rather puzzled with it all and remained serious. "Is your name funny, too?" he asked the little man.

The little man's tight lips were stretched in what Percival came to know for his most advanced sign of amusement. He opened his lips very slightly when he spoke, and the short pipe that seemed to grow there did

not appear at all to incommode his speech. "Why, try it for thyself," said the little man, — "Japhra."

"Well, I've not heard it before, you know," said Percival politely. "You don't mind my asking questions, do you?" he added. "This is rather funny to me, you know."

"Why, I'm a questioner myself, little master," the little man assured him. "I'm questioning always. I go through life seeking an answer."

"What for?" asked Percival.

"Why, that's the question, little master," said the little man. "What for? Who knows?"

Percival regarded him with the same puzzled air that he sometimes gave to Aunt Maggie. "Well, if you don't mind," he said, "what are you, then?"

Far from minding, Japhra seemed to like it. Twinkling away: "Why, that's another question I ask and cannot answer," said he. "What is any man? One thing to one man and one thing to another — a riddle to himself, little master. But I can unriddle thee this much: Wintertime I am a tinker that mends folks' pots and pans; Springtimes I am Punch-and-Judy-man that makes the children laugh; Summertimes I am a fighter that fights in the booths. I have been prize-fighter that fights with the knuckle; cattleman over the sea; jockey, and wrestler, and miner, and preacher once, and questioner since I was thy size; there's unriddling for thee."

"It's a good lot," said Percival gravely. "What are you just now, please?"

"Or a bad lot," said Japhra. "Who knows? — and there's the question again! No escape from it." He looked solemn for a moment and then twinkled again. "Just now a fighter, little master. To-morrow I join

Boss Maddox's circus for the summer with my boxing booth."

"Boss Maddox!" cried Percival. "Why, Mr. Stingo goes with Maddox's circus. Do you know Mr. Stingo?"

"None better," said Japhra. "I am of Stingo's crowd, as we say. Dost thou?"

"I know him very well," Percival declared. "I know his brother best. They call me a Pocket Marvel, you know; so I should like to know what you think of that?"

"Why, I think that's what thou art," said Japhra. "A rare one. There were fairies at thy christening, little master."

"What for?" asked Percival and asked it so seriously that Japhra twinkled anew and replied: "Why, there's the question again. What for? Why that sunny face they have given thee? and those fine limbs? and that straight back? What for? There's some purpose in it, little master."

He looked strangely at Percival as though behind his twinkling he indeed questioned these matters and found, as he had said, a question in all he saw. But when he saw how mystified he held Percival, he stopped his searching look and asked: "Any more questions, little master?"

He had kept his finger on the open page of his book all this time; and Percival pointed and said: "Well, what are you reading, if you please?" and was told "Robinson Crusoe."

"Why, I'm reading that!" cried Percival in much delight.

"Then thou art reading one of the only three books a man wants," said Japhra. "There's 'Pilgrim's Progress'—"

"I've read that too! In Mr. Amber's library—"

"And there's the Bible."

"And that as well!" cried Percival.

"Why," said Japhra — not twinkling now, but grave — "why, then, thou hast read the beginning and end of wisdom. Crusoe and Pilgrim and Bible — those are the books for a man. I read them and read them and always read them new. They are the books for a questioner, and thou art that amain. And they are the books for a fighter, and that is thy part. I have unriddled thee so far, little master. I know the fighting type. Mark me when the years come. A fighter, thou."

He placed a blade of grass in "Robinson Crusoe" and put the volume beneath his arm. He got up and took Percival's small hand in his horny fist. "Come thou and see my van, little master," said he. "We are friends — thou and I and Ima here." And then he twinkled again. "And why? What brought thee whom the fairies attended and that has read the books and is the fighting type? What brought thee here? Why, there's the question again!"

It was the beginning of Percival's chiefest friendship of them all. In the rare proper seasons that followed one another through this the happy, happy time, the van came more and more frequently Lethamwards. Summertimes it was away with Stingo's crowd in Maddox's Monster Menagerie and Royal Circus. But Wintertimes it would come tinkering, and sometimes remain a week or more snow-bound, and Springtimes Punch-and-Judying through the Burdon hamlets; and these were happy, happy times indeed. There was all Japhra's lore, all his dimly understood "questioning" to hear; and all his stories of his strange and varied life; and all his reading aloud from his three books, who could read them and put a meaning into them as none other could.

And there was the boxing to learn, with Percival a very apt and eager pupil and Japhra insistent that it was a proper game — the only proper game for a man. And once every summer there was the visit of Maddox's Monster Menagerie and Royal Circus to Great Letham, where Percival, — introduced by Japhra, sponsored by Stingo, — was made enormously welcome by rough, odd van folk who were of "Stingo's crowd." He learnt the sharp and growing difference between Stingo's crowd and Boss Maddox's men. Boss Maddox was boss and of increasing wealth and weight: attracting showmen to his following from many parts of the country and incorporating them in his business, but unable to win the allegiance of the little knot of independents who called Stingo "Boss," and hating them for it. Rough, odd men who made an immense deal of Percival and had rough, odd names: Old Four-Eyes, who wore spectacles and had a Mermaid and a Mummified Man; Old One-Eye, whose left eye was gone and had a Wild West Rifle Range; Old 'Ave One, who was given to drink ("'Ave one, mate?") and had the Ring 'em where Yer Like — A Prize fer All; and the rest of them. Percival never mixed with the Maddox crowd but once, when he boxed, and to the immense delight of Japhra and all the Stingo men, defeated, a red-haired, skinny youth of his own age, whom Boss Maddox was introducing to the public as the Boy Wonder Pugilist. "Looks like a fox to me," Percival said aloud, when he first saw the Boy Wonder. The Boy Wonder heard, and the men who stood about heard and laughed; there certainly was a foxy look about the Juvenile Wonder's cunning face with its red head. The Wonder furiously resented the remark and the laughter; expressed a desire to shut Percival's mouth; succeeded in shutting one of his eyes, but was certainly beaten.

He became Percival's first enemy — and chance set aside the first enemy for further use.

II

Ima, when the van came Lethamwards, was Percival's first girl friend, and chance had use also in store for her. She was a strange, quiet, very gentle thing, but one that could run, as she had told him, and bold and active stuff for any ramble. With odd ways, though.

"Ima, you do look at me an awful lot," Percival told her in the early days, catching her large eyes fixed upon him.

"Well, thou art not like other boys I see," she told him; and a little while after she asked him, "Dost thou know little ladies with white skins like thine, little master?"

"I'm brown!" said Percival indignantly.

She shook her head. "But little ladies?"

"I know one," said Percival. "White! Well, you'd stare if you saw her, Ima. Snow-White-and-Rose-Red, I call her," and in his tone was something akin to the mingled admiration and awe with which small schoolboys speak of their cricket captain.

She was silent for a moment; then, "Well, tell me, little master," she said.

It was of Dora that he told her.

When Lady Burdon had returned that call paid on her by Mrs. Espart from Abbey Royal she had been as greatly captivated by Dora as she had been taken by Dora's mother. She found in Mrs. Espart a curiously cold and high-bred air that appealed to her — being a quality she was at pains to cultivate in herself — and appealed the more in that it very graciously unbent towards her. Its unbending was explainable by the

quality that, for her own part, she presented to Mrs. Espart — that of her rank and station.

Mrs. Espart had been married in her teens, brought from school for the purpose, by a mother whose whole conception of duty in regard to her daughters was wealthy marriage, and who had fastened upon it in this case in the person of Mr. Espart — a nice little man, an indifferently bred little man, but a most obviously well-possessed little man. The girl was hurriedly fetched from her finishing school, whirled through a headachy fortnight of corseting and costuming, and put in Mr. Espart's way and then in his possession with the docility of one educated from childhood for such a purpose. Used as a woman who never had realised there was a life beyond the cloisters bounded by lessons in deportment, in the nice languages and the nice arts; as a wife who never yet had been a child but always a young lady, Mrs. Espart discovered that she was mated with a vulgarian, Mr. Espart that he had married, as he expressed it, "a frozen statue." She thought of him and despised him as the one; he thought of her, feared her, and adored her as the other. The chill she struck into his mind communicated itself in some way to his bones, and very shortly after he had bought Abbey Royal — her command being that he should nurse the local political interests, enrich the Party from his coffers and so win her the social status her sisters had — he began to shrivel and incontinently died — frozen.

Mrs. Espart proceeded to bring up the child born of this marriage precisely as she had herself been brought up, — in narrow cloisters, that is to say, in dutiful obedience and for the ultimate purpose of suitable marriage. She repeated in Dora's training the training she had received from her own mother, its object the same, with this

difference — that whereas in her case that object was a wealthy match, in Dora's — Mr. Espart having made wealth unnecessary — it was position. Time was absurdly young for any plans when Mrs. Espart first met Lady Burdon, but plans had crossed her mind when she drove out to leave cards at the Manor: she had heard of Rollo. She made Lady Burdon very welcome when Lady Burdon came.

Dora was two years younger than Rollo, Lady Burdon found. When, on the occasion of this visit, she was brought to the drawing-room — a strikingly pretty child in a curiously unchildish way — she already showed marks of the machinery that ordered her life. She was curiously prim, that is to say, of noticeably trained deportment; curiously self-assured and yet not childishly frank; curiously correct of speech and with a dutiful trick of adding "Mamma" to every sentence she addressed to her mother.

She was her mother's child; similarly trained; similarly developing. "A very well brought-up child," as Lady Burdon afterwards commented to her husband, and noted in her also the strong promise of the beauty that later years were to realise. She was to be notably tall and was already slim and shot-up for her years; she was to be notably fair of complexion and showed already a wonderful mildness and whiteness of skin, curiously heightened by the little flush of colour that warmed in a sharply defined spot on either cheek. Lady Burdon rallied her once during their conversation — the subject was French lessons, which it appeared she found "Terribly puzzling, Lady Burdon, do I not, Mamma?" and her face responded by a curious deepening of the red shades, her cheeks and brow gaining a hue almost of transparency by contrast.

It was that quality and that characteristic that made Percival — meeting her when she was brought over to tea with Rollo — call her, as he told Ima, Snow-White-and-Rose-Red.

The name was from his fairy book, and to his mind fitted exactly this fragile and well-behaved and reserved Miss who he thought was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. It fitted her more surely yet when he came to know her when she was fourteen and just returned, Rollo also having come to the Manor, for her first holidays from the highly exclusive school to which she was sent.

By then the friendship between Lady Burdon and Mrs. Espart had grown to closest intimacy. They met, and Dora and Rollo met, intimately in London; and Abbey Royal was rarely closed when Burdon Old Manor was opened. Mrs. Espart had suffered to lapse that attitude towards the little post office boy which Lady Burdon had termed "ridiculous." She never liked, and certainly never encouraged, Percival, but she accepted him as undetachable from Rollo, whom by now she encouraged greatly in friendship with Dora, and it was thus that Dora at rare intervals contributed to these days of the happy, happy time.

At fourteen she was actively advanced in her first term at the exclusive school by the machine that was shaping her. Strikingly now she promised, as always she had hinted, what should be hers when full maidenhood was hers. The singular fairness of her complexion was the grace that first struck the observer; and with it was to be noticed immediately the curious shade on either cheek that flushed to a warm redness when she was animated, and, flushing sharply within its limitations, sharply threw into relief the transparent fairness of her skin.

Her head, small and most shapely, was poised with the light and perfect balance of a flower on its stem. Her features were small, proportioned as a sculptor would chisel the classic face — having the straight nose, the delicate nostrils, and the short upper lip of high beauty. Her eyes were well-opened, strangely dark for her fair colouring, well-lit, with the light and shade and softness of dew on a dark pansy when the sun first challenges the flowers at daybreak. Her abundant hair, soberly dressed in a soft plait that reached her waist, was of a dull gold that in some lights went to burnished brass. She was poised upon her feet with the flower-grace of her head upon her throat. She was of such a quality and an air that you might believe the very winds would divide to give her passage, afraid to touch and haply soil so rare a thing.

Percival in these days went beyond even his first wonder at her. He had never believed there could be such a beautiful thing, and at their meetings he was very shy — regarding her with an admiration that was very apparent in his manner. He, certainly, if not the winds, had in her presence a feeling of necessity to be gentle with so rare and strange a thing. He could class her nowhere except with Snow-White-and-Rose-Red; and to him that was her meetest class — belonging to a different race and to be indulged as an honoured guest should be; permitted to have caprices; expected to be strange.

She came occasionally to tea at the Old Manor. The boys would take her then for a walk in the grounds — sometimes further afield. Percival, never free from the wonder she caused in him, always had much concern for her on these occasions. He constantly inquired if they were not going too far for her; he would always propose they should turn back if they came to a muddy lane. It

happened once that a lane desperate in mud could not be avoided. He showed her the drier path against the hedge, but this was so narrow as to require some balancing to keep it.

"You must hold my hand," he said.

To shake hands with her had always been a matter of some diffidence. Now he was to support her while she picked her way. He took her little gloved hand in his. It lay warmly within his grasp; and concerned lest he should hurt so delicate a thing, he let it rest in his palm, passing his fingers about her wrist where there was bone to feel.

"Tell me if I hurt you," he said. "I'm trying not to — and not to splash" — and he trod carefully, above his boot soles in the mire.

She told him: "You're not, thank you. These lanes are wretched. I hate them."

Much of her weight was on him. There was a perfume about her person, and it came to him pleasantly: he had never walked so close to her before. The soft plait of her hair was about her further shoulder, hanging down her breast. With her free hand she held her skirt raised and closely against her legs for fear of brambles in the hedge. Percival looked at her daintily-shod feet, picking their way, and he gave a funny little laugh.

"What are you laughing at?" she asked him.

"My boots — and yours. You must have funny little feet."

She half withdrew her hand.

"I think you are the rudest boy I have ever met," she said.

"Oh, I didn't mean to be rude," Percival declared.

She told him in her precise way: "You are rude, although you are nice in some ways. I think I have never

known any one stare at me so frightfully as you stare. I have seen you often staring."

Percival gave for explanation: "If I stare, it's because I've never seen any one like you."

She gave the slightest toss of her chin.

He went on: "Do you know what I call you? I call you Snow-White-and-Rose-Red."

He saw the blush shades on her cheek very slightly darken. It sounded a pleasant thing to be called. But she said: "It sounds stupid; what is it?"

"From a fairy tale. Don't you know it?"

"I don't care about reading."

"What do you like doing best of all?"

"I think I like going for drives — and that;" she half slipped and added, "I simply hate this."

"I've got you perfectly safe," Percival assured her.

She said nothing to that, either of doubt or thanks; and they finished the lane in silence. But when dry ground was reached and she withdrew her hand, she thanked him prettily. With Rollo — who had no wonder of her and whom she saw more frequently — she was on easy terms; and now the three walked back to the Old Manor more companionably than was usual with them. When Dora left, she surprised Percival by thanking him again; she surprised him more by showing him a little mark on her hand he had held and playfully protesting his grasp had caused it. Thereafter when they met she had a smile for him.

He liked that.

She came to be very frequently in his mind, though why he did not know. Once he came to Aunt Maggie with a dream he had had of her. "The rummiest dream, Aunt Maggie. I dreamt I was chasing her, and chasing her, and calling her: 'Snow-White! Snow-White! Rose-

Red! Rose-Red!' and every time I nearly caught her Rollo came up and caught hold of me, and away she went. And fancy! I fought Rollo! Aren't dreams absurd?"

Aunt Maggie put her hand to her forehead. "Was that the end, dear?"

"Why, the end was more absurd than ever. Although I tried, I couldn't hit Rollo — simply couldn't. He hurt me, but I couldn't do anything, and he threw me down and went off with Dora. Doesn't it show how ridiculous dreams are? Fancy dear old Rollo being stronger than me! Is your head hurting, Aunt Maggie?"

"Just a shoot of pain — it's gone now."

While he described his dream, and while she pictured it, one of those flutterings had run up violently in her brain. It passed, but left its influence. "Absurd!" she agreed. "If ever you did quarrel with him —"

Percival laughed. "I never could, in any case."

"Are you very fond of him, Percival?"

Rollo was returning to London that day. "I simply hate his going away," Percival said. "I wish to goodness he lived here always. He wishes it, too."

CHAPTER VII

BURDON HOUSE LEASED: THE OLD MANOR OCCUPIED

I

It happened that within a very short time of that wish it was granted. Burdon House in Mount Street was let; Burdon Old Manor was permanently occupied.

This began in a visit that Lady Burdon, very decidedly out of temper, paid to Mr. Pemberton at the office in Bedford Row. Relations between Lady Burdon and the little old lawyer had radically altered since that occasion of their first meeting at Miller's Field. Mr. Pemberton, who in these years had relinquished to his son all the business save the cherished Burdon affairs, had long been aware that the misgivings which had clouded his first happy impression of Lady Burdon had been the juster estimate of her character. He had perceived the dominance she exercised over her indulgent husband; he had accepted, after what protest he dared, that the management of the estate was in her hands. He had foreseen the fruits of the wilfulness of a woman thrown out of balance by the sudden acquisition of place and possessions; it was because these fruits were now being plucked that he preferred to keep the Burdon affairs in his own hands. He could not bear the thought of handing over to his son this honoured trust in shape that would cause a lifting of the eyebrows: "Father, I've been going through the Burdon papers. I say,

they seem in a precious bad way . . . I don't understand. . . ."

He could not endure the thought of that.

On this day when Lady Burdon came angrily — and defiantly — to Bedford Row, the position was raised very acutely between them.

"I know — I know," Mr. Pemberton was saying. "But, Lady Burdon, you must perceive the possibility — nay, in the circumstances, the extreme probability — that though Lord Burdon countenances in the smallest particular all you find it necessary to spend — and on the property not to spend — he yet may not appreciate the state of affairs — the imperative necessity that a halt be called. I have written to him frequently. The replies come from you."

She parted her lips to speak, but he had already had sufficient taste of her mood to make him hasten with: "I know. I know. Lord Burdon has told us both that he hates business and that he likes to encourage you in the pleasure you find in it. That is admitted, Lady Burdon. We have no quarrel there. My point is — how far is Lord Burdon to be suffered to indulge his dislike? how long is he to be kept in ignorance? I think no longer. That is why I purpose making a call on him. I purpose it, again, because I believe Lord Burdon's influence — when he understands — may join with mine to move you, where mine alone causes you annoyance."

He indicated the papers that littered the table. "You see the position. I tell you again — I tell you with all the seriousness of which I am capable — that the crash is as near to you as I am near to you sitting here. I tell you that it is not to be averted unless for a period — a mere few years — Burdon House is given up. It

will let immediately on a short lease. There, alone, will be more than relief — assistance. It will save you much that you now find necessary — there is the relief of the whole situation."

She broke out: "It would never have come to this but for the cost of this irrigation scheme on the Burdon property. That is your doing — yours and Mr. Maxwell's. I tell you again I was amazed — amazed when I heard of it."

"And I have reminded you, Lady Burdon, that when I approached you in the matter you desired not to be troubled with it. I had often and often urged it upon you. This time you said it was to be left entirely to our discretion — Maxwell's and mine."

"I shall repudiate the contract. The work is not begun. You can get out of it as best you can."

He said very quietly, "That is open to you — of course." He paused and she did not speak, and he went on. "You would have no case, I think. The authority is too clear. But I do not mind saying I would try to get out of the contract or —. Our firm could not be involved in a lawsuit against the house we have served these generations." He dropped his voice and said more to himself than to her: "No — no. Never that!" He looked up at her and assumed a cheerful note: "You have to think of your son, you know, Lady Burdon. What is he to come into? This irrigation scheme will be the making of the property — the land cries for it. If you can cut off the Burdon House establishment for a few years, young Mr. Rollo will have reason to bless you when in process of time he assumes the title. If you decide —"

She rose abruptly: "I must be going."

Mr. Pemberton hobbled after her down the stairs to

attend her to her carriage. A bitter wind was blowing. The coachman was walking the horses up and down. The footman who waited in the doorway, rugs on arm, ran into the street and beckoned to him. Lady Burdon watched the carriage, tapping her foot on the ground and frowning impatiently. A large piece of pink paper came blowing down the pavement, somersaulting along in a ridiculous fashion — heels over head, heels over head, grotesquely like a performing tumbler.

"Cold!" said Mr. Pemberton, briskly, rubbing his hands together. "Very cold!"

She made no reply. She was much out of temper. She was considerably beset. She was stiffening with an angry determination against abandoning her life in town. She was freshly aroused against Mr. Pemberton for his devoted loyalty to her husband's house — he had stung her by the manner of his acceptance of her threat to repudiate the contract; and by his reference to Rollo — he had hit her there.

The tumbling paper — a newspaper contents bill she could see — flung itself flat a few yards from them, throwing out its upper corners as it came to rest, for all the world like an exhausted tumbler throwing out his arms. The carriage drew up.

With a foot on the step: "You need not call on Lord Burdon till I have written to you — to arrange a date," she said.

Mr. Pemberton replied: "I certainly will not. I will await your letter, Lady Burdon."

She settled herself in her seat, drawing her furs about her. He was certainly a doddering old figure as he stood there — shrunken in the face, bent in the body, his few white hairs tumbled in the wind.

"Your house is very dear to me, Lady Burdon," he

went on. "You must believe I act only in your best interests — in what I believe to be — "

She nodded to the footman, turned towards her from the box, and the carriage began to move. The tumbler contents bill leapt up with an absurd scurry, somersaulted down to them, and flung itself flat with a ridiculous air of exhaustion.

"Tragedy in the House of Lords," she read idly, and drove away.

II

Lady Burdon drove straight home. She arrived to be apprised she was concerned in the "Tragedy in the House of Lords" that the tumbler bill had brought somersaulting down the street. As the carriage drew up, a maid hurried down the steps and gave her the news: "His lordship" — the girl was scared and breathless — "His lordship, my lady — taken ill in the House of Lords — fell out of his seat in a faint — brought him home in Lord Colwyn's carriage — carried him up-stairs, my lady — fainted or — a doctor is with him, my lady."

Lady Burdon wrestled with the confused sentences, staring at the girl, not moving. "Fainted or —"

She threw back the rug from about her lap and sprang from the carriage. A newsboy rushing down the street almost ran into her, and she had to stand aside to give him passage. Her eye caught the pink bill fluttering against him where he held it: "Tragedy in the House of Lords."

God! The tragedy was here. She ran swiftly up the steps and up the stairs. At the door of Lord Burdon's room terror leapt at her like a live thing so that she staggered back a step and could not turn the handle.

"Fainted or — ?" She caught her hand to her bosom, her poor heart beat so. She had a vision of him dead, being carried up the steps. There flashed with it a vision that showed him tired after lunch and her saying: "If you knew how elegant you look, lounging there! You ought to go to the House. You never go. You can sleep there;" and he saying, "Right-o, old girl."

Sleep there? Had she driven him to die there? Fainted or — ?"

She entered the room. A man wearing a frock-coat stood by the dressing-table. She stared, and stared beyond him to the bed. She put her hand to her throat and strangled out the word "Maurice!" The man turned to her and began to speak. She ran past him and flung herself beside the bed and took Lord Burdon's hand and pressed it to her face. She burst into a terrible sobbing, raining tears upon the hand she held. From the threshold she had seen the eyes open, the faint twist of a smile of greeting upon the white, pained face.

Alive! That was sufficient! For the moment, in the first agony of her distress, she required nothing more. Between the recovery from her first shock at the news, and the terror that had held her back when she reached his door, remorse, like bellows at the forge, quicked her every memory of him to burning irons within her. Happen what might, she was to be suffered to slake their torture.

She felt the hand she held move in her grasp. It was his signal of response to her sympathy. He said very weakly, in an attempt at the old tone: "Made an — awful ass — of — myself, old — girl." He groaned and breathed: "O God! Pain — pain!"

She would not speak to the doctor. She desired

nothing but to be left there holding that hand, feeling it move for her and pressing it against her face that was buried upon it when it moved. She desired to be told nothing, to do nothing. This was between him and her —let them be left to it while yet they could be left! A procession of pictures was marching through her mind. In each she saw herself in a scene of her neglect of him or her impatience with him. She had the feeling that while she might hold that hand and feel it move, each picture would pass — atoned for, forgiven, erased. This was between him and her — let them be left to it while yet they could be left!

Movements, the opening and closing of the door, whispering voices, came to her. Some one touched her. She shook herself at the touch and crouched lower. This was between him and her! — for pity's sake! — if you have pity, let us be left to it while yet we can be left!

The movements continued. They seemed to be closing about her — impatiently waiting for her. They began to force themselves upon her attention so that her mind must leave its pictures and distinguish them. She crouched lower . . . if you have pity! She heard stiff rustlings and fancied a nurse was in the room. She heard a heavier step and presently felt a touch that seemed to command obedience.

She raised her head — A nurse, the man she had first seen, another man — older. He pointed at the figure on the bed and motioned with his head towards the door. Maurice seemed to sleep. She rose with a little shuddering gasp and looked at them, twisting her hands together — if they had pity! . . . what did they require of her?

The older man was bending over the bed, whispering with the younger. The nurse came to her, smiling gently,

and nodded towards him: "Sir Mervyn Aston. He will speak to you outside. Will you not leave us just a moment? Quite all right."

She remembered the name. It was the specialist Maurice had sometimes consulted. She had not bothered much about it: but she remembered the name. Sir Mervyn looked towards her and moved across the room. She looked again at the bed. The nurse nodded brightly. She followed Sir Mervyn to the door.

"Down-stairs," he said, and trod heavily down before her. He was a great man and took the privilege of bad manners. In the library he turned to her: "Did you send for me?" She had not expected that. She had expected sympathy — at least information. She stared at him, momentarily surprised out of her grief. His face was stern; she believed his manner accused her.

"No," she said.

"You expected this?"

Expected it! Of what could he be thinking?

"I've told Lord Burdon repeatedly that this life — I've warned him again and again to get out of it. Hasn't he told you?"

Now she knew that he was accusing her. She never had cared to listen when Maurice told her he had been to Harley Street. She stood twisting her hands together, nervous before this brusque man.

"Hasn't he told you?"

"No."

He looked sharply at her. He was a great man and had learned to read between the lines that his fashionable patients presented him. "A pity," he said briefly. "This might have been averted for many years."

"Tell me" — she said, and could say no more: "tell me —"

His tone became a little kinder. "We must hope for the best, you know. There is always that. I will look in again at midnight. They are making him quite comfortable up-stairs."

He said a little more that she did not catch. Presently she realised that he had left her. "This might have been averted for many years!" She ran to a bureau and fumbled frantically for pen and paper. She was in a sudden panic to do one thing that she believed would soften that dreadful sentence if the worst came. She was in a panic to get it done before there might be a sound from above and a horrid running down the stairs. She found her writing materials. Pen in hand she listened, trembling violently. No sound! As quickly as she could write she scrawled to Mr. Pemberton: "I have decided. We are going to Burdon Old Manor at once. Make arrangements to let the house, please."

Whatever happened now, she had begun her share of the bargain she prayed to press on death. If death would spare him, she would devote her life to him!

As she was sealing the letter Rollo came in. He had been to a matinee with Mrs. Espart and Dora, at home for her holidays. Lady Burdon gave a little motherly cry at the sight of him and took him in her arms.

They went up-stairs together.

The doctor had gone. The nurse told her Lord Burdon was asleep; but when she went to her former position on her knees beside the bed and took his hand again, he opened his eyes and his eyes smiled at her; and then closed; he seemed desperately weary.

She did not cry now. There was this bargain to be forced on death; and, as with the letter, so now with her promises, she was in a panic to get them done, believing that if death — God, as she named it — might know

all she offered to pay, he must accept the price and hold his hand.

She was not the first that has believed death — or heaven — is open to a deal.

Through the long evening she knelt there, Rollo with her. Thus and thus she promised — thus and thus would she do — thus and thus — thus and thus! Mostly she bargained, frantically reiterating. At intervals she would turn to protest — protesting that her sin was very light for so heavy a threat. What had she done? She had done no wrong. She had no flagrant faults — she was serenely good, as goodness is judged. She was devout — she was charitable. Only one little failing, heaven! She had desired to enjoy herself, and enjoying herself had neglected him. But he did not care for the things she liked. Indeed he did not! He was happiest when she was happy. Indeed he was! Yet she saw the error of her way. If he might be spared, heaven — thus and thus — thus and thus — thus and thus!

Physical weariness overcame her as she heaped her promises, leading her mind astray and tricking it into nightmare dreams whence she would struggle with trembling limbs. The dreams took gross or strange forms. She would be running down the street pursued by the tumbler contents-bill, somersaulting behind. It caught her and fell flat, flinging out its armlike corners, and she saw it was Maurice. She stooped to him, and it was the bill again, gone from her on the wind. She pursued it, and saw it take semblance of Maurice, and pursued it with stumbling feet and could not catch it.

She struggled from these horrors and found her mind again. She was intensely cold, she found. Sir Mervyn had come and was bending over her husband. Sir

Mervyn nodded to her and sat down by the bed. She dared ask no questions. She crouched lower where she knelt. The night went on — Sir Mervyn still there. She prayed on — thus and thus! thus and thus! She was tricked into the nightmare dreams. She was with Rollo's friend, Percival, and running to Rollo, who seemed in distress. A woman stopped them. She recognised in her the girl who had come with that claim to be Lady Burdon years before. The girl caught Percival and held him and Percival held her. She struggled to be free, for Rollo was calling her wildly. His cries grew louder, louder, louder, and burst as a real cry suddenly upon her.

"Mother! Mother!"

She started up. Rollo was on his feet, bending towards his father.

"Lift! Lift!" Lord Burdon murmured.

Sir Mervyn raised him. She clutched his hand. He rallied upon the strength of life's last pulse and flutter, and smiled, and murmured, "Poor old girl!"

Then she saw death come; and she turned and threw her arms about her son.

BOOK FOUR

BOOK OF STORMS AND OF THREATENING STORM. THE ELEMENT OF LOVE



BOOK FOUR

BOOK OF STORMS AND OF THREATENING STORM. THE ELEMENT OF LOVE

CHAPTER I

PLANS AND DREAMS AND PROMISES

I

THREE women were counting the years now. The years were rolling up — curtain by curtain, like mists from a distant hillside; and behind them the ultimate prospects for which Lady Burdon waited, Mrs. Espart waited, and Aunt Maggie waited began to be revealed. Mrs. Espart had conveyed to Lady Burdon her ambition — formulated long ago — with regard to Dora and Rollo. Lady Burdon reckoned the union as very desirable and gave its consumation a first place among her aspirations for her Rollo. Aunt Maggie saw the hour of her revenge approaching so that its years might now be estimated on the fingers of one hand.

So near the desirable ends were approaching that the women began to name dates for their arrival. Youth, with only a few years lived and so enormous an experience gained in those years (as youth believes), cannot endure the thought of planning ahead for a space that is a fair proportion of its whole lifetime. Five years is a monstrous, an insupportable period to youth that has lived but four times five or less. Age, with fewer years to live than have been lived, and with the knowledge of

how little a decade has to show, will plan for five years hence with nothing near so much of sighs and groanings as youth will suffer if it must wait five months.

The women began to name dates. Those very close friends, Lady Burdon and Mrs. Espart, spoke of dates frequently. Mrs. Espart and Dora had already "come into the family" as Mrs. Espart smilingly expressed it, when, at Lord Burdon's death, and on being acquainted with her dear friend's intention to let the Mount Street house on a short lease and retire to Burdon Old Manor, she had offered herself as lessee. The offer had been most gratefully, most gladly accepted. The great town house was made over to Mrs. Espart for a seven years' term and thus, in Mrs. Espart's phrase, "remained in the family"—ready for Rollo and Dora, as the ladies plotted.

And now they were naming dates. "When Rollo is twenty-four," Lady Burdon said to Mrs. Espart, come over from Abbey Royal to lunch at the Manor one day, "look, dear, he is just on twenty now. You know my plans. Next year he is to go to Cambridge. His illness has thrown him back. But next year will be time enough. Three years at Cambridge, then, and that will bring him almost to twenty-three. Then I wish him to go abroad — to travel for a year. That is so good for a young man, I think. Then when he comes back he will be ready to settle down and he will come back just the age for that tradition of ours — celebrating comings-of-age at twenty-four instead of twenty-one. That would be so splendid for the wedding, wouldn't it?"

"Splendid!" Mrs. Espart agreed. "Splendid! That old Mr. Amber of yours was trying to tell me the other day how that twenty-four tradition arose. But, really, he mumbles so when he gets excited — !"

"Oh, he's hopeless," Lady Burdon agreed. Her tone

dismissed his name as though she found his hopelessness a little trying, and she went back to "Yes, splendid, won't it be? When I look back, Ella, everything has gone wonderfully. From the very beginning, you know — the very beginning, I planned a good marriage for Rollo. It was so essential. To be your Dora — well, that makes it perfect; yes, perfect!" — and Lady Burdon stretched out her hands and gave a happy little sigh as though she put her hands into a happy future and touched her Rollo there.

"And I for Dora," Mrs. Espart said. "From the very beginning, too, I arranged great matches for Dora in my mind. That it should be your Rollo," — she gave a little laugh at her adaptation of the words — "that it should be your Rollo — why, really, perfect is the word!"

They were silent for a space, enjoying the beauty of the hillside that the thinning years were disclosing.

"You've never said anything to Rollo?" Mrs. Espart asked.

"Oh, no — no, not directly, anyway. It will come about naturally, I feel that. They are so much together. And in any case Dora — Dora is so wonderfully beautiful, Ella. I couldn't conceive any man not falling in love with her. In a year or so's time, developing as she is — why, you'll change your mind perhaps — when they're all worshipping her!"

She laughed, and her laugh was very reassuringly returned. "But it is Rollo she will marry," Mrs. Espart smiled. "With her it is as you say with him — it will come naturally. In any case — well, she is being brought up as I was brought up. She is dutiful. You find so many girls encouraged in independence nowadays. Nothing is so harmful for a girl ultimately, I think."

Lady Burdon nodded her agreement. "How happy

Rollo will be!" she said, and spoke with a little sigh so caressingly maternal and with eyes so fondly beaming that Mrs. Espart put out a hand to touch her and told her, "I love your devotion to Rollo, Nellie."

"He is everything to me," Lady Burdon said softly. "Everything!"

"I know he is. Why, you look different again when you speak of him even! Do you know, you were looking wretchedly ill when I came this morning, I thought."

"I had slept badly." Lady Burdon looked hesitatingly at her friend as though doubtful of the expediency of some further words she meditated. Then, "I had my nightmare," she said; and at the question framed on Mrs. Espart's lips went on impulsively: "Ella, I've never told you about my nightmare. I think I shall. It worries me. Do you know, just after we came into the title a girl came to see me and said she was the former Lord Burdon's wife."

"*No!* What happened?"

"Oh, nothing, of course — nothing serious. I sent her away. She said she would bring proofs; but I never saw her again."

"You wouldn't, of course. One of those creatures, I suppose," and Mrs. Espart curled her lip distastefully and added: "I suppose some young men will do those things — no doubt that's what it was; but it's rather disgusting, isn't it? And how very horrible for you! But, Nellie, where does the nightmare come in?"

"With the girl," Lady Burdon said and gave a little uneasy movement as though even the recollection worried her. "With the girl. I dream of her whenever — that's the odd thing — whenever something particular happens. See her just as I saw her then and say 'I am Lady Burdon,' and she says 'Oh, how can you be Lady Burdon?'

Then I get that dreadful nightmare feeling — you know what it is — and say 'I hold!' and she says 'No, you do not—Nay, I hold!' It's too silly—but you know what nightmares are. And it only comes when something particular happens—or rather is going to happen. The night before we heard of old Lady Burdon's death, that was once. Then the night before we came down here for that stay when Rollo met his friend Percival and we began to come regularly. Then the night my husband died." She stopped, smiled because Mrs. Espart was smiling at her indulgently, as one smiles at another's unreasonable fears, but went on, "and now last night!"

Mrs. Espart laughed outright: "Why, what a hollow moan, Nellie! — 'and now last night!' I'd no idea you were such a goose. You've let the silly thing get on your silly nerves."

"Only because things have always happened with it."

Her concern, however foolish, was clearly so genuine that Mrs. Espart changed banter for sympathetic reassurance. "Why, Nellie, really you must be more sensible! Why, dreaming it last night proves how silly it is. What's happened to-day? Look, I'll tell you what's happened to-day, and it's something to settle your wretched girl and your omens once and for all. She nightmared you last night and to-day we've settled how happy we are all going to be with our young folk married! There! Tell her that with my compliments if she ever comes again!"

Her air was so brisk and stimulating that Lady Burdon was made to laugh; and her facts were so convincing that the laugh was followed by a little sigh of happiness, and Lady Burdon said: "Why, Ella, it's funny, isn't it, how in this life some things *do* go just as one wishes, for all that people say to the contrary?"

That was to be proved. Down at "Post Offic," while the ladies planned, a date was also being named.

II

"But when? When?" Percival was saying to Aunt Maggie. "I'm eighteen — eighteen, but you still treat me like a child. I ought to be doing something. I'm just growing up an idler that every one will soon be despising. But when I tell you, you ask me to wait and say I've no need to be anxious and that I shall be glad I waited when I know what it is you are planning for me."

"You will be, Percival," Aunt Maggie said.

But he made an impatient gesture and cried again: "But when? When? That satisfied me when I was a boy. It doesn't now. I'm not a boy any longer. That's what you don't seem to see."

That indeed he was boy no more was written very clearly upon him as he stood there demanding his future — not for the first time in these days. He was past his eighteenth birthday: his bearing and his expression graced him with a maturer air. The mould and the poise of head and body that as a child had caused a turning of heads after him were displayed with a tenfold greater attraction now that they adorned the frame of early manhood. There was about the modelling of his countenance that air of governance that is the first mark of high breeding. The outlines and the finish of his face were extraordinarily firm, as though delicate tools had cut them in firm wax that set to marble as each line was done. The chin was rounded from beneath and thrown forward; and to that firm upward round the lower jaw ran in a fine oval from where the small ears

lay closely against the head; deeply beneath the jaw, cut cleanly back with an uncommon sweep, was set the powerfully modelled throat that denotes rare physical strength. The eyes were widely opened, of a fine grey — unusually large and of a quality of light that seemed to diffuse its rays over all the brow. The forehead was wide, with a clear, sound look. Outdoor life had tinted the face with the clean brown that only a fine skin will take; the hair was of a tawny hue and pressed closely to the scalp. He was of good height and he carried his trunk as though it were balanced on his hips — thrown up from the waist into a deep chest beneath powerful shoulders. He held his arms slightly away from his sides in the fashion of sailors and boxers whose arms are quick, tough weapons. After all this and of it all was a gay, alert air, as though he were ever poised to spring away at the call of the first adventure that came whistling down the road. His face was not often in repose. Ardent life was forever footing it merrily up and down his veins, delighting in motion and in its strength, and his face was the mirror of its discoveries.

Just now, voiced in his "I'm growing up an idler that every one will soon be despising," it was discovering restrictions that his brow mirrored darkly. "It's not fair to me, Aunt Maggie," he said. "I ought to be doing something for myself. I must be doing something for myself. But you put me off like a child. You tell me to wait and won't even tell me what it is. You tell me to wait — when? when?"

Aunt Maggie said pleadingly: "Soon, Percival, soon."

"No, I've heard that — I've heard that!" he cried. "I want to know when."

She named her date. "When you are of age, dear. When you are twenty-one."

He cried: "Three years! Go on like this for three years more!"

He swung on his heel and she watched him go tremendously down the path and through the gate.

CHAPTER II

FEARS AND VISIONS AND DISCOVERIES

I

PERCIVAL took the highroad with the one desire to be alone — to walk far and to walk fast. The prodding of his mind that goaded him, "I'm growing — I'm losing time — I'm settling into a useless idler!" that tortured him he was in apron-strings and likely to remain there, produced a feverish desire to use all his muscles till he tired them. His feet beat the time — "I must *do* something — I *must* do something!" and he swung them savagely and at their quickest. It was not sufficient. He was extraordinarily fit and hard; the level road, despite he footed it at his fiercest, could scarcely quicken his breathing. A mile from "Post Offic" he struck off to his right and breasted the Down, climbing its steepness with an energy that at last began to moisten his body and to give him the desired feeling that his strength was being exercised. "I must do something!" he spoke aloud. "I must — I can't go on like this — I won't!" and taxed his limbs the harder. If he must feel the chains that bound him in idleness, let him at least make mastery of his body and rebuke it till it wearied.

At the crest of Plowman's Ridge he paused and drew breath and turned his face to the wind that ever boomed along here and that had come to be an old friend that greeted his ears with its jovial, gusty Ha! Ha! Ha!

Far below him he could see "Post Offic" with its garden running to the wood. From his distance it had the appearance of a toy house enclosed by a toy hedge, the toy trees of the wood rigid and closely clipped like the painted absurdities of a child's Noah's Ark. As he looked, a tiny figure came from the house and went a pace or two up the garden and seemed to stand and stare towards him up the Ridge. Aunt Maggie, he was sure, and had a sudden wave of tenderness towards her, looking so tiny and forlorn down there. He remembered with a prick at heart that, even in the heat of his anger in the parlour half-an-hour ago, he had noticed how small she looked as she stood pathetically before him, gently replying to his impatience. He thought to wave to her with his handkerchief, but knew she could not see him. He remembered — and another prick was there — that she had said, seeking, no doubt, to win a moment from his violence, "Do you see my eyeglasses, dear? I'm getting so shortsighted, Percival." He flushed to recollect he had disregarded her words and had threshed ahead with his "It's not fair to me — not fair to me, keeping me here doing nothing!" He had been unkind — he was unkind — and she was so small, so gentle, so loving, so tender to his every mood.

But that very thought of her — how small she was, how gentle — that had begun to abate his warring mood, returned him suddenly to its conflicts. That was just it! — so small, so gentle, so different from him in every way that she could not understand his situation and could not be reasoned with. No one understood! No one seemed to realise how he was growing, and how blank the future, and hence what he was growing. They all laughed at him when he spoke of it.

They all laughed! Mr. Purdie laughed — Mr. Purdie

had laughed and said, "Oh, you're not a man yet, Percival!" and had given his absurd, maddening chuckle.

"His silly, damned chuckle!" cried Percival to old friend wind at the top of a wilder burst of resentment against the world in general and for the moment against Mr. Purdie in particular.

Rollo laughed — Rollo had laughed and declared: "Oh, don't start on that, Percival! That'll be all right when the time comes."

"When the time comes! Good lord! The time has come," Percival told old friend wind. "It's slipping past every day. All very well for old Rollo — all cut and dried for him. For me! I'm to be idling here when he goes to Cambridge, am I? And idling like a great lout when he comes back!"

Lady Burdon laughed — they all laughed, thinking him foolish, not realising. Ah, they would laugh in another way — and rightly so — when they did realise, when they saw him standing among them idle, useless, helpless, dependent on Aunt Maggie. They would all laugh — they would all despise him then. Everybody. . . .

II

As he came to that thought — visioned some distorted picture of himself, overgrown, hands in pockets in the village street, and all his friends going contemptuously past him — there came a sudden change in old friend wind that for a moment left him vacant, then somehow changed his thoughts anew. Old friend wind, that had been buffeting him strongly in keeping with his turbulent mood, dropped, and he was in silence; then came with a different note and bringing a scent he had not apprehended while it went rushing by. Nothing odd that he

should be responsive to this change. The wind on Plowman's Ridge was old friend wind to him, and everybody who is friends with the wind knows it for the live thing that it is — the teller of strange secrets whispered in its breezes, the shouter of adventures thundered in its gales. Who lies awake can hear it call "Where are you? Oh, where are you?"—who climbs the hill to greet it, it welcomes "Welcome — ho!" Sometimes, to those who are friends with it, it comes lustily booming along in high excitement ("This way! This way! There's the very devil this way!"); sometimes softly and mysteriously tiptoeing along, finger on lip ("Listen! Listen! Listen! Hush — now here's a secret for you!").

In this guise it came to him now — dropped him down from the turbulence of spirit to which it had contributed, caught him up and led him away upon the cloudy paths of the scent it gave him. The fragrance it bore in this its whispering mood stirred, in that quick and certain manner that scents arouse, associations linked with such a fragrance. There was in the scent some hint of the perfume that was always about Dora; and immediately he was carried to thought of her. . . .

She to see him idler! She to pass him by contemptuously! His mental vision presented her before him as clearly as if she were here beside him on the Ridge. He saw her perfect features, with their high, cold expression; the transparent fairness of her skin; that warm shade of colour on either cheek that, as though she saw him watch her, deepened with their strange attraction even as he visioned her. He visioned her clearly. He could have touched her had he stretched a hand. And he was caused — he knew no reason for it — a slight trembling and a slight quickening of his breath.

She to see him idler! . . . In rebuke of such a thought he released his mind to wild and undisciplined flights that showed himself the champion of tremendous feats — of arms, of heroism, of physical prowess — performing them beneath the benison of her eyes, returning from them to receive her smiles. . . .

For a considerable space he stood lost among these clouds. They had drifted upon him suddenly. He found them delectable. Then he began to find them strange and puzzling — scenes that were meaningless, sensations that could not be determined. It is to be remembered of him that, though he was now advanced to the period when the sap is up in youth and quickening in his veins, he did not pursue the life nor was he of the nature that encourages the amorous designs. A sluggish habit of mind and body is the soil to nurture these: he was alert and braced, eager and sound from foot to brain — a thing all fibre and fearless, whose only quest was what should give him the challenge of movement, of light, and ring back tough and true when he taxed it. No room was here, then, for the disturbances that sex throws up; and yet these very qualities that such disturbance could not undermine conspired to arouse him very mightily when he should turn him to enquire what this disturbance was, and discovering, should launch himself upon it.

He was near to the brink of that launching now. Dora with her rare beauty always had exercised upon him a feeling different from any he commonly knew; he never yet had troubled to suppose that it was caused by any emotion outside his normal life. She had astonished him by her grace of form and feature on that day when he had discovered her to be Snow-White-and-Rose-Red of the fairy book. Thereafter she had remained to him

a delicately beautiful object — set apart from the ordinary fashion of persons he knew; not to be treated quite as he treated them; a very dainty thing, making him aware of the contrast that his own sturdy figure, strong limbs, brown face, and hard young hands presented. As a boy he had always been caused a manner of awe in her presence; as he grew older the awe went back to the sheer admiration that she had caused in him at their first meeting. Out of her company, in the long months that frequently separated her visits, he rarely thought of her; though sometimes — and he had no reason for it — he would find her pretty figure in his mind or in his dreams. When he reëncountered her, the admiration sprang afresh; he liked to watch her face, to stand unnoticed and expect, then see, her cold smile part her lips, or those strange shades of colour deepen and glow upon her cheeks; he liked in little unobserved ways to protect her as he had protected her that day in the muddy lane; it caused him a strange rapture to have her thank him for any service.

III

These were his relations to her through the years. He never had thought to analyse them nor question why he so regarded her — never till now. Now for the first time as he stood on Plowman's Ridge he mused among the misty tangle of the sensations that old friend wind had brought, lost and astray among the visions presented to his mind by estimate of how Dora would consider his idle plight — now for the first time he suddenly questioned himself what she was to him.

He was all unused to the sensations in which, by an effort recalling himself from his musings, he found him-

self suffused. They were all — that slight trembling and that slight quickening of his breath that possessed him — foreign to his nature, and he made a sharp movement as though they were tangible and visible things that he would shake from about him. Useless! — they had him wrapped. . . . Quicker his trembling, and his breath quicker. What was she to him? Up sprang the answer, answering with a triple voice that demanded his acknowledgment. Up sprang the answer, causing him a physical thrill as though indeed there burst at last from within him some essence that had been too long held and now was loosed like fire through his veins. With a triple voice, clamouring he should recognise it! What was she to him? Her face and figure stood in all their beauty before his mental eye — that was one voice and he trembled anew to hear it. What was she to him? Memory of a light speech of Rollo on the previous day came flaming to his mind: "And mother, I believe, has a plot with Mrs. Espart that I shall marry Dora then and settle down" — that was a second voice and stung him so that he knit his brow. What was she to him? Of them all — of all who would laugh and have him in scorn when he was taskless idler — bitterest, most intolerably goading, that she should hold him so — that was the third voice and drew from him a sharp intake of the breath as of one that has touched hot iron.

What was she to him? In triple voice he had the answer, demanding his acknowledgment, clamouring for his recognition. By a single word he signed the bond. None was by to listen, and yet he flushed; there was none to overhear, and yet he spoke scarcely above a whisper. He just breathed her name — "Dora!"

An intense stillness came about him. He stood enraptured, all his senses thrilled. Out of the stillness,

echo of his whisper, seemed to come her name of Dora! Dora! Dora! floating about him as petals from the bloomy rose. He raised his face to their caress and was caught up in sudden ecstasy — believed he was with her, touching her; and saw and felt her stoop towards him, bringing her perfume to him as the may-tree stoops and sheds its fragrance when first at dawn the morning breathes in spring.

IV

So for a space he stood etherealised — awed and atremble; youth brought suddenly through the gates and into the courts of love where the strong air at every tremulous breath runs like wine to the brain, to the heart like some quick essence. For a space he stood so; then was aware that old friend wind was up again and drumming Ha! Ha! Ha! upon his ears as one that mocks.

What was she to him? The answer, now he had it, stirred to wilder tumult the feelings that had brought him turbulently breasting up the Ridge. He looked again towards "Post Offic," toylike below, and had no tender thought for it — bitter vexation instead, as of the captive who goes to fury at the chains that bind him.

That he should submit to be thus chained, thus apron-stringed! That Dora should laugh! That she should know him idler! Goading thoughts — maddening thoughts, and he flung himself, bruising himself, against them as the captive against his prison walls. That she should laugh! It should not be! It was not to be endured! He threw up his head in determination's action, his hands clenched, his body braced, resolve upon his angry brow.

Ha ! Ha ! Ha ! drummed old friend wind — Ha ! Ha ! Ha !

He gave a half cry and turned and strode away along the Ridge, taking the direction that led him from home, and exerting himself under new impulse of the desire to rebuke his body and haply ease his mind.

"You knew! You were expecting me!" Percival cried again, and went eagerly to them as they rose to greet him, his hands outstretched.

"Father knew thee before I heard thy footsteps," Ima told him. "The fire crackled at my ears or I had known."

She seemed to be excusing herself, as though not to have heard were short of courtesy; and Japhra, who had Percival's hand, gave a twist of his face as if to bid him see fun, and teased her with: "Thou didst doubt, though, Ima, for look how I had to bid thee 'watch where he comes.'"

Percival thought she would toss her head and protest indignantly as when he used to tease her when they had trifled together. Instead, her eyes steadily upon his face, "Nay, for I knew it was he," she replied simply.

He no more than heard her. At a later period he found that the words had gone to the backwaters of his mind, where trifles lie up to float unexpectedly into the main stream. Years after he recalled distinctly her tone, her words, and the look in her eyes when she spoke them.

Now he laughed. "You two can hear the world go round, I believe." He turned to Japhra: "But how on earth you could tell —"

"Footsteps are voices, little master, when a man has lived in the stillness."

Percival laughed again — laughed for pure happiness to hear himself still given that familiar title, and for pure happiness to be again with Japhra's engaging ideas. "You're the same as ever, Japhra — the same ideas that other people don't have."

"Ah, but 'tis true," Japhra answered him. "Footsteps have tongues, and cleaner tongues than ever the mouth

holds. Look how a man may oil his voice to mask his purpose — never his feet. Thine called to me, how eagerly they brought thee."

"Eagerly! — I should think they did! You're just the one I want. I've not seen you for a year — more. Eagerly — oh, eagerly!"

Japhra's bright eyes showed his delight. "And we were eager, too. We have spoken often of little master, eh, Ima? Not right to call him that now, though. Scarcely reckoned to see him so grown. Why, thou'rt a full man, little master — there slips the name again!"

He twinkled appreciatively at Percival's protest that to no other name would he answer, and he went on: "A full man. Ten stone in the chair, I would wager to it. What of the boxing?"

"Pretty good, Japhra. The gloves you gave me are worn, I can tell you."

"That's well. Never lose the boxing. It is the man's game. Ay, thou hast the boxer's build, ripe on thee now as I knew would be when I saw it in thee as a boy. The man's game — never lose it."

"I'm keener than ever on it," Percival told him. "I'm glad you think I've grown. I've got a punch in my left hand, I believe." His spirits were run high from his former despondency, and he hit with his left and sparkled to see Japhra nod approvingly and to hear him: "Ay, the look of a punch there."

"Yes, I've grown," he said. "You've not changed, Japhra — not a scrap."

Japhra nodded his head towards the fir trees. "Nor are the old limbs yonder. They stay so till the sap dries, then drop. Nary change. Only the young shoots change. What of Ima?"

She had turned away while they talked. She was back

at the fire, and Percival turned towards where she stood, about to lift from its hook the cooking pot that hung from the tripod of iron rods. As he looked, she swung it with an easy action to the grass. The pot was heavy: she stooped from the waist, lifted and swung it to the grass with a graceful action that belonged to her supple form, and, as the steam came pouring up and was taken by a puff of breeze to her face, went back a step and looked down at her cooking from beneath her left forearm, bare to the elbow, raised to shield her eyes.

III

That was Percival's view of her. She had put up her hair, he noticed, since last he saw her. It was dressed low on the nape of her neck; evening's last gleam delighted in its glossy blackness against her olive skin. Beneath the arm across her face he saw the long lashes of her eyelids almost on her cheeks, as she stood looking downwards. Her mouth was long, the lips, blending in a dark red with her brown colouring, lying pleasantly together in the expression that partners the level eye and the comfortable mind. She was full as tall as Percival — very slim in the build and long in the waist that was moulded naturally from her hips to spread and cup her bosom, and therefore taller to the eye. She wore a blouse of dark red cloth; her skirt was of blue, hung short of her ankles, and pressing her thighs disclosed how alert and braced she stood. She wore no shoes nor stockings, and her feet, slender and long, appeared no more than to rest upon the short grass that framed them softly.

"What of Ima?"

"Ima? — Ima has grown, though," Percival said. "Why, she's simply sprung up!"

"Ay, grown," Japhra agreed. "Grown fair," he added, watching her.

Percival said, "Yes, she is pretty." The vision of Dora's high fairness came to his mind, challenged and rebuked his favour of another of her sex, and returned him swiftly to the stress that had brought him down here for comfort and that the first reëncounter with Japhra had caused to be overshadowed. His eyes lost their brightness. He remained looking dully at Ima, not seeing her; and presently started and flushed to realise that he was hearing a repeated question from Japhra.

"What ails, master?"

"Ails? I heard you the first time, Japhra. I was thinking. I'm troubled — sick. That's what ails."

His face flushed with the same cloudy redness that the beat of rising tears drives into the faces of children. On the Ridge he had put against his trouble the stiffness that was of the bone of Burdon character. Down here was sympathy — and he was very young; it sapped the stubbornness.

"That's what I'm here for," he said thickly. "To tell you, Japhra."

Japhra had a keen look to meet the misty countenance that was turned to him.

"Food first, then," he said, and gave a twinkle and a sniff at the savour from Ima's cooking that made Percival smile in response. "Naught like a meal to take the edge off trouble. There'd be few quarrels in the world if we all had full bellies always."

"Well, food first, then," Percival agreed, making an effort; and he raised his voice: "What's Ima got for us?"

She turned at the sound of her name and smiled towards him, and the smile caused beauty to alight upon

her face as a dove with a flashing of soft wings comes to a bough. He saw it. Her beauty abode in her mild mouth and in her seemly eyes. Her parted lips discovered it to step upon her face; her raised eyes released it, starry as the stars that star the forest pool, to star her countenance.

CHAPTER IV

IMA'S LESSONS

SHE had odd ways, Percival found — oddly attractive; sometimes oddly disconcerting. She did not at first contribute to the conversation while they ate. She was very quiet; and that, and the way in which, as he noticed, she kept her eyes upon him, was in itself odd. Dusk was veiling the camp as they took the stew she had prepared. They had the meal on the grass near the van, and Percival, not eating with great ease in the squatting pose, noticed how erect she sat, as though her back were invisibly supported — her plate on her lap, the soles of her bare feet together.

He deferred his trouble, as Japhra had proposed, till the meal should be done. He was interested to know where the van had been all these months; and when he questioned Japhra, "We have had the solitary desires, Ima and I," Japhra told him. "The solitary desires, master, whiles thou hast been growing. A sudden wearying of Maddox's and all the noisy ones. North to Yorkshire, we have been; west to Bristol's border; deeper west to Cornwall. The road has had the spell on us — calling from every bend and ever keeping a bend ahead, as the road will to those who are of it. Summers we have passed the circus on its tour and laid a night with old Stingo and then away, urgent to move quicker and lonelier. Trouble has worsened in the circus crowd."

"What, between Stingo's men and Boss Maddox's?"

"Ay," said Japhra. "Boss Maddox is the biggest showman in the west these days. He rents the pitches at all the fairs before the season begins; and the Stingo crowd, who must take what he gives, he puts in the worst places. His hand is heavy against them. One fine day the sticks will come out and there'll be heads broken, as happened on the road back in '60. I was in that and carry the mark of it on my pate to this hour. Pray I'll be there when this one falls."

"I'd like to be with you, Japhra."

Japhra showed his tight-lipped smile: "Well, a camp fight with the sticks out and the heads cracking is a proper game for a man, master. Thou'dst be a handy one at it, I warrant me" —

Ima broke in with her first contribution to their talk. She said quickly: "Shame, Father. Not for such as he — fights and the rough ways."

But she was silent again and without reply when Percival sought to rally her for this opinion of him; and Japhra twinkled at him and said: "There's one would like to meet thee, though — sticks or fists"; and went on, when Percival inquired who: "Thy friend Pinsent. Thy name of Foxy for him has stuck to him and he has not forgiven thee. A fine fighter he has grown — boxed in some class rings for good purses in the winter months, and in the summer is a great attraction at the fairs. Boss Maddox is fond of him. Boss Maddox has fitted him with a booth of his own and he gets the crowds — deserves 'em, too. But 'Foxy' has stuck to him — and suits him. He hates it; and's not forgotten where he owes it."

Percival laughed. "Well, if he's done so well, I ought to be proud to have given him something to remember me by. He could wallop me to death, of course."

"There's few of his weight he could not hand the goods to," Japhra agreed. He looked estimatingly at Percival and added: "One that could keep the straight left in his face a dozen rounds'd serve it up to him, though. Foxy has no bowels for punishment. I have watched him."

And again Ima broke in. "Ah, why dost talk so?" she addressed her father. "He is nothing for such ways — fights and the fighting sort."

This time Percival would not let her opinion of him escape without challenge. "Why, Ima!" he turned to her, "that's the second time you've said that. Seems to me you think I ought to be wrapped in cotton-wool."

His voice was bantering, but had a note of impatience. The events of the day had not made him in humour to take lightly any estimate of himself that seemed to reflect on his manliness.

She noticed it. Her voice when she answered him had a caressing sound as though she realised she had vexed him and would beg excuse. "Nay, only that thou art not for the rough ways — such as thou," she said; and, mollified, he laughed and told her: "Well, you never used to think so, anyway. You've changed, you know, Ima, changed a lot since I last saw you."

"And should have changed," Japhra announced. "Scholar with lesson books, she has been these winter months."

Percival thought that very quaint. "Scholar, Ima; have you?" he asked her, and saw the blood run up beneath her dusky skin. "I can't imagine you at lessons!"

"Nor those who taught me," she replied; and paused and added very gravely, speaking in her gentle voice, "Yet have I learnt — and still shall learn."

Percival asked: "Learnt what?"

Odd her ways — oddly attractive, oddly disconcerting;

speaking steadily and more as if it were to herself and not to listeners that she spoke. "Learnt to sit on a chair," she told him, "and to sit at a table nicely; to wear shoes on my feet, and stockings; to go to church and sing to God in heaven; to talk properly as house folk talk; to sleep in a bed; to wear a hat and stiff clothes; to abide within doors when the rain falls and when the stars alight in the sky — these have I learnt."

Percival was tempted to laugh, but her gravity forbade him. "How terrible it sounds — for you! But why, Ima, why?"

She did not answer the question. She smiled gently at him and went on with the same air of speaking to herself: "Lessons from books, also. Figures and the making of sums; geography — as capes and bays and what men make and where; of a new fashion of how to hold the pen stiffly in writing; of nice ways in speaking — chiefly that I should say 'you' when I would say 'thou' — that is hardest to me; but I shall learn."

Something almost pleading was in her voice as she repeated, "I shall learn;" and Percival turned for relief of his puzzlement to Japhra: "Why, whatever's it all for, Japhra?"

Japhra gave his tight-lipped smile. "Woman's reasons — who shall discover such?" But Ima made a motion of protest, and he went on: "Nay, the chance fell, and truly I was glad she should have woman's company — and gentle company. In Norfolk where we pitched the winter gone by was a doctor I had known when we were young — he and I. He shipped twice aboard a cattle boat with me, having the restlessness on him in those days. Now I found him stout and proper, but not forgetful of an indifferent matter between us. He brought his lady to the van, and she conceived a fancy

for Ima, holding her a fair, wild thing that should be tamed. Therefore took Ima to her house and to her board, and taught her as she hath instructed thee. Thus was the manner of it; as to the wherefore — why, woman's reasons, as I have said," and he smiled again.

Ima got abruptly to her feet. The meal was ended, and she began to collect the plates. Her action plainly rebuked the further questions with which Percival was playfully turning to her. He offered instead to help her with her washing of the dishes, but she told him: "Nay, maid's work this. Abide thou with father, and talk men's talk." In the action of moving away she turned to Japhra and added her earlier plea: "So it is not of boxing and the rough ways."

CHAPTER V

JAPHRA'S LESSONS

I

JAPHRA took up Ima's words when she had left them. "Nay, but the boxing is my business," Japhra said, filling his pipe. "I'm for the boxing again this summer. Money's short and old Pilgrim yonder has full earned his rest and must have another take up his shafts. Another horse is to be bought, wherefore a sparring booth again for me."

Percival asked: "When are you going?"

"To-morrow. I pick up the circus by Dorchester. My lads are waiting me. Ginger Cronk, I have — thou mind'st Ginger? — and Snowball White, a useful one. Stingo seeketh another for me. A good lad, I must have, if the money's to be made, for Foxy Pinsent hath a brave show that will draw the company — two coloured lads and four more with himself."

Percival was silent. "I wish I could go with you," he said presently: "And you're going to-morrow, you say? — to-morrow?"

"At daybreak, master."

"Ah!" Percival gave a hard exclamation as though feelings that were pent up in him escaped him. "Now I had found you again, I hoped I was going to see you often for a bit. My luck's right out," and he gave a little laugh.

Japhra lit his pipe. "So we come back to thy trouble," he said.

His voice and a motion that he made invited confidence. Percival watched through the dusk the glow from his pipe, now lighting his face, now leaving it in shadow. He had longed to tell Japhra; he found it hard.

After a moment: "Hard to tell!" he jerked.

"How to bear? That is the measure of a grief."

"Impossible to bear!"

"Tell, then."

"There's little to be told. That's it! That's the sting of it — so little, so much. A man must do something with his life, Japhra!"

"Ay, that must he, else life will use him, breaking him."

"Why, that's just it! That's what will happen to me! I'm a man — they think I'm not; there, that's the pith of it!" He was easier now and in the way of words that would express his feelings. He went on: "Look, Japhra, it's like this —" and told how he was growing up idler, how Aunt Maggie answered all his protestations for work for his hands to do by bidding him only wait — and he ended as he had begun: "A man must do something with his life!"

He stopped, — aware, and somehow, as he looked through the dusk at Japhra, a little ashamed, that his feelings had run his voice to a note of petulance. He stopped, but a space of silence came where he had looked for answer. Evening by now was full about the camp. Night that evening heralded pressed on her feet, and was already to be seen against the light in the windows of the van where Ima had lit the lamp. From the pool was the intermittent whirring of a warbler; somewhere a distant cuckoo called its engaging note that drowsy birds should not make bedtime yet. In the pines a song-thrush had its psalm to make; at intervals it paused and

the air took a night-jar's whirr and catch and whirr again. Old Pilgrim cropped the grass.

II

Percival said: "What are you thinking of, Japhra?"

"Of life."

"What of life?"

"How hot it runs."

"Meaning me — I'm in a vile temper, I daresay you think."

"How hot it runs, master — how cold it comes and how little the profit of it."

Percival said heavily: "What is the use of it, then?"

Japhra bent forward to him and Percival saw the little man's tight-lipped, firm-lined countenance with the tranquil strength of mind that abode in the steady aspect of the bright eyes, deep beneath their strong brows.

"The use?" Japhra said. "Nay, that is the wrong way of estimate. For thee in thy mood, for all men when life presses them, inquire rather what is the hurt of it. How shall so small a thing as life, a thing so profitless, that soon becomes so cold, returneth to earth and is nothing remembered nor required — how shall so small a thing offend thee and make shipwreck of thy content? Thus shouldst thou judge of it."

"Some men are not soon forgotten, Japhra."

"Ay, master, and what men? They that have seen how small a thing is life and have recked nothing of it."

"How have they done great things, then? — fought battles, written books?"

"Why, master, how wrote Bunyan in chains or Milton in blindness?"

"They didn't mind."

"Even so. Profitless they knew life to be, and cared not how it tasked them."

"But, Japhra, that's — that's all upside down. Are there two things in a man, then — life and — ?"

Japhra said: "So we come to it — and to thee. Truly there are two things: life which is here in the green leaf, and gone in the dry; and the spirit which goeth God knows where — into the sea that ever moves, the wind that ever blows, the sap that ever rises — who shall say? But knoweth not death and haply endureth forever if it were mighty enough — as Milton, as Bunyan. Look at me, master, for that is the plain fact of it and the balsam for all thy hurts."

He stopped and drew slowly at his pipe with little puffs that floated to Percival like grey thistledown dropping through the night.

"Go on," Percival said. "Go on, Japhra."

"Why, there thou hast it," Japhra told him. "Lay hold on thy spirit — let that be thy charge; and of what cometh against thee take no heed save to rebuke it as a boxer rebuketh the cunning of him that is matched against him. So was the way of Crusoe, of old Bunyan's Pilgrim, and of the Bible men, and that is why I call them the books for a fighting man. Here's my way of it, master — there's force in the world that moves the tides and blows the winds and maketh the green things grow. Out of that force I unriddle it we come, and back to it return. In some the spirit is utterly swallowed up in life, and at death crawleth back suffocated and befouled and only fit to come again in some rank growth — so much a lesser thing than when it came springing to a human breast that the force of the world whence it came is by so much lessened and can give birth to a flower less and a toadstool more."

"And then there's the other way about," said Percival, attracted by this argument.

"Ay, truly the other way about, master. The way of the mighty men in whom the spirit rebuketh life and increaseth, and at death goeth shouting back — so quickening the force of the world that, just as the cup spilleth when much is added, so there be mighty storms when great men die — thunders and rushing winds, great lightnings and vast seas."

Percival drew a long breath. "Why, it's a fine idea, Japhra — fine."

"Look at a case of it," Japhra said. "My Bible in the van there hath one. I have it by heart. Look when Christ died. Never a man than He cared less how life tasked Him; and at His death — when there went shouting back the spirit that He had increased beyond the increase of any man — look thou what came: 'And behold the veil of the Temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth quaked; and the rocks rent and the graves were opened.' And again: 'And it was about the sixth hour; and there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour; and the sun was darkened.'"

He stopped; and Percival breathed long and deep again: "Fine, Japhra — fine. I never thought of it like that. Fine — I think I see."

"Surely thou dost, master; or any man that giveth thought to it. Take it to thine own case — that is my word to thee. Reck nothing how life assaileth — hold on only to thy spirit. Thou wouldst be doing something and art irked by the bonds that hold thee — never fear but that in its time the thing will come. I have seen men — I know the fashion of them. Thou art of the mould and mind to which adventures come. See to it thou art

ready for them when they arrive — trained as the boxer is against the big fight."

Percival said heavily: "What's the prize, Japhra?" Now that the application of this engaging view was pressed to his own case he had a dark vision of what it required of him. "What's the prize?"

"Why, content! Look, little master, here's happiness, here's content — and content is all the world's gold and all its dreams. Whatever cometh against thee, whether through the flesh or through the mind, get thou the mastery of it. How? Every man according to his craft. The philosophers, the reckoners — theirs to judge bad against good and find content that way. That was old Crusoe's manner of it. Thou art the fighting type — the Ring for thee."

Percival got abruptly to his feet. At the same moment Ima opened the door of the van and stood above them — held, as it were, upon the light that streamed from the interior.

"The Ring for thee," Japhra repeated, "there to meet and conquer all thy vexations. Make a boxer of thy spirit. Step back through the ropes then and take up the champion belt marking thee thine own man, thine own master: a proud and jewelled thing to wear — content."

Ima's voice broke in upon them. "The champion belt?" she said. "What, is it still boxing, thy talk?"

Japhra turned his face up to her and the lamplight showed the twinkling with which he met the reproach in her voice. "Why, it is my trade," he said, "and thine. In two days thou'lt be taking the money at the door of my booth."

"Not his trade, though," she answered.

Percival said: "Japhra, would I be a likely one for your booth, do you think?"

He was holding out his hand in the action of farewell. Japhra got up and took it and held it. "Why, if I get as proper a build as thine for my third lad I will put a polish to it that would vex Foxy Pinsent himself. Keep up the boxing, master. Art thou going?"

Percival said abruptly, "Yes, I'm going." He released the hand and went away a step. "I'm going. I've a longish way home and things to do before bedtime. You'll be gone at daybreak?"

"At dawn, little master."

"On the Dorchester road?"

"Ay, to Dorchester."

"All the luck with you, Japhra. I'm better for seeing you." He spoke jerkily as though his throat were full and speech difficult. He stopped abruptly, and half turned away; then, recollecting Ima, went back to the van and stretched up his hand to where she stood: "Good night, Ima."

She stooped down to him. The action brought her face into the darkness and he noticed how her wide eyes, as she stooped, seemed actually to light it. "Farewell!" she said.

It was perhaps that he had so obviously only attended to her as an afterthought that her throat, for all the sound her word had, might have been as full as his. Some thought of the kind — that he had been churlish to her — crossed him. He said more kindly: "I say, though! your hand is cold, Ima."

She withdrew her fingers, giving him no reply. But as he turned away and went a step, "What of thy way home?" she cried, and cried it on a sudden note as though it went against her will.

"By the Ridge," he told her. "By Plowman's Ridge and then along."

She answered him: "Yes, I am cold. I will warm me to the Ridge with thee — if thou wilt suffer me."

In the mood that was on him he had preferred to be alone. But under the same apprehension of having been churlish to her, "Why, that's jolly of you," he said.

III

She went within the van a few moments; and while he waited he had a last exchange with Japhra: "You've helped me, Japhra. But I shall disappoint you if I'm tried too hard. Content — I'll make a fight for it. But I shall not endure it very well if I am still to be idler." He gave a hard little laugh. "When it's a fight for mastery of myself I shall disappoint you, I believe."

Japhra told him: "I have seen men, master, and know the fashion of them. Thou wilt not disappoint me."

"You can't say that of any one — for certain."

"I say it of thee. Though thou failest a score times thine is the mould that comes again — for that I shall look. Listen to me, little master — that name clings: I cannot shake it from me. Listen to me. Thy type runneth hot through life till at last it cometh to the big fight. Send me news of that." He struck a match to relight his pipe and cupped the flame against his face. "Send only 'The Big Fight, Japhra,'" he said.

The flame of his match built up the dusky night in walls of immense blackness. In their heart Percival saw the kindly face with its tight lines and keen eyes. "I shall know the winner," Japhra said; and the cup of light within his hands shadowed and lit again his face as he nodded.

The Big Fight was drawing towards Percival. Aunt

Maggie had the very date of it, and the articles reckoned and ready. When it rushed suddenly upon him and he was in its stress and agony, he remembered the lighted face, the confident nod and the message that was to be sent.

CHAPTER VI

WITH IMA ON PLOWMAN'S RIDGE

I

IMA had put on shoes and stockings when she reappeared from the van and joined Percival to accompany him to the Ridge. The two were come almost to the Down's skirt before they exchanged words. "I have things to do before bedtime," Percival had told Japhra; and as he walked he was too occupied by the thoughts of what he purposed — hunted by them as the tumult of his concerns had hunted him earlier in the day — to give attention to Ima who had come with him when he had preferred to be alone. She was perhaps aware of that. She followed the half of a pace behind the short, impatient steps that partnered — and signified — his mood, her eyes watching what of his face she could see and ever and again turning swiftly ahead, as though she feared he might catch her at it and feared that might offend him; so a dog that knows itself unwanted may be seen, wistful at its master's heels — with little wags of a timid tail and with beseeching glances; eager to communicate some succour to this angry mood; afraid to hazard what may further vex.

Yet he was pleasant when presently he spoke to her.

They stepped from a dense lane about whose mouth and overhead the arching brambles trailed as though to curtain a sanctuary from trespass by outer dust and breeze and light. Before them the Down ran smooth and

grey to where, beneath the moon, it took a silver rim along the line of Plowman's Ridge. A harsher scent was here than briar and wild rose breathed within the lane and jealously entwined to hold there; the breeze came with a swifter touch to the face; the light challenged the eyes that the gloom had rested.

Together their effects aroused Percival's senses from his thoughts to his companion.

"Warmer now, Ima?" he asked.

"Warmer now, little master," and she smiled and added: "unseemly to call thee that, now thou hast grown so."

He moved with her to a gate that faced the Down. "Let's rest a bit," he said. "Why, we've both grown, Ima, since the last time I saw you. You've grown. You've put up your hair — properly grown up. I shall have to treat you with terrible respect."

She did not respond to his light tone. Her eyes that looked quietly at him had a grave air. "I am a gipsy girl to thee," she said. "I am not for thy respect — such as me. For ladies that." And before he could answer her she went on: "What of that little lady thou hast told me of — Snow-White-and-Rose-Red as thou didst name her to me?"

He did not notice a changed tone — to be described as stiff — in her voice. It did not occur to him that in the matter of his respect she made comparison between herself and her whom she named with his fond name for her; he was only surprised and only grateful to have that name spoken to him.

"Why, she's grown," he said. "Fancy you remembering her, Ima!"

Eagerness was in his voice. "I am cold again," she told him, and drew away. "Let us go up the Down."

He did not follow her movement or her words, but

pursued his own " — remembering that I called her that, anyway," he said.

If it had been her purpose to dismiss the subject, at least she earned herself his full attention by the swiftness with which she turned upon him and by the swiftness of her reply. "It is thee I remember," she answered him. "Not her — or any such. Thou wast my friend when we played boy and girl together. All thou hast done with me, all thou hast told me, point me the way to thee as remembered marks along the road point to a camping-place — no more, and of themselves nothing."

She had his attention; but he attributed the quickness of her speech and her odd thought and simile only to the general oddness of her ways. "Well, you needn't go back to those days in future," he told her. "We're friends now just as much as then."

She shook her head and smiled. "Nay, after this day I must needs go farther back," she said, her voice smooth again. "Thou dost not understand — playmate days I seek. I lie in my bed on the fine nights with the van door wide, and watch the stars and play I walk among them — from star to star and round about among the stars, high to the van's roof and low to where the trees and hills stretch up to them: thou with me as when first I knew thee — in that wise I seek thee; not thus" — she broke off and changed the note of her voice. "What talk is this?" she smiled. "Childish fancies — they are not for thee," and she moved away and he followed her up the Down.

"Ima, they're pretty fancies, though," he said. "And, you know, you'll lose them all if you aren't careful — if you go making yourself stiff and proper with those extraordinary lessons of yours. What are they for, those lessons? They'll spoil you, Ima. They'll make you

quite different. All that kind of thing is for — for the others — for what you'd call fine ladies."

"Even so," she said; and pronounced the words as if — though to his mind they explained nothing — everything was explained by them; and said no more until the crest of Plowman's Ridge was reached.

II

He was willing enough for his own part to relapse into his own thoughts. He went so deeply into them that, coming to the Ridge and involuntarily pausing there, he was twice told by her "Here I return," before he was aroused to her again. Bemused, he stared at her a moment as one stares that is aroused from sleep, and his mind jumped back in confusion to the last words that had passed between them. "Well, if you were so anxious for the lessons, why did you give them up when the winter was over?"

She answered him — sadness in her voice rather than reproach — "We have done that talk long since. Thou dost not heed me. It is that I am going that I am telling thee."

He knew he had been careless of her again, and sought to laugh it off. "Well, it is why you stopped your lessons that I am asking thee," he mimicked her. "Woman's reasons, Ima?"

She threw out her hands towards him in a gesture of appeal. "Ah, do not toy me woman's reasons," she said. "Think me less light than that — if thou thinkest of me. Not woman's reasons bade me back to the van when winter broke. Not woman's reasons. I knew me there were green buds in the ditches beneath the dead wet leaves. I had discovered them to the sun and

the breezes many years — turning back the leaves and smelling the smell they have. How could I stay beneath a roof when I had thoughts of such?"

She drew a deep and tremulous breath of the mild night air as though she inhaled the scents of which she spoke, and he watched her gaze across the eastward vale with those starry eyes that, as she went on, never the lids unstarred, and she said: "Thoughts of such — of green buds in the ditches beneath the moulding leaves that waited for me to uncover them and knew me when I came; of the first cloud of dust along the road — dust, ah! of tiny sprigs on every bough that I might run to see; of busy birds stealing the straws and coming for the bits of cloth and wool they know I place for them; of early light with all the trees and fields wet and aglisten; of gentle evenings when the new stars come dropping down the sky; of the road — the road, ah! — I sitting on the shafts; of the cool brooks, and leading Pilgrim in and hearing him suck the water and hearing him tear the grass; of the running stream about my feet and the soft grass that sinks a little — these bade me back."

She turned to him and said in the low voice in which she had been speaking: "Not women's reasons these." She changed her voice to one that cried: "Remember me that if I am not like fine ladies I cannot help be what I am with these things speaking to me. Now I am going," and she went swiftly from him and was a dozen paces gone before he called her back.

III

"Ima!" While she spoke he had envisaged what she told, setting its freedom and its elemental note to his own desires as one sets music that stirs the breast. Shaking

himself from the spell, "Ima!" he called, and went to her. "Don't go like that. Say good-by properly."

She stopped short and put her hand to her side as though his call had launched a shaft that struck her. She did not turn — as though she dared not turn — until he was close up to her, touching her. Then she turned, and he saw her eyes amazingly lit, and as they met his, saw the light pass like a star extinguished. It was as if she had expected much and had found nothing; and it was so pronounced that he said: "Ima! Why, what did you think I was going to say?"

There was a wild rose in the bosom of her dress that she had plucked as they came through the lane. She bent her head to it and put her hands to it in the action of one that seeks to cover lack of words by some occupation. She drew the flower from her breast and placed it in his coat, pinning it there.

"That's right," he smiled. "I'll keep that to remember you by. What did you think I was going to say? You seemed as though you expected something — then as if you were disappointed. What was it?"

She was very careful in settling the flower. Then she dropped her hands and looked up at him. "I asked nothing," she said. "How should I be disappointed?"

"Asked! No! I saw it in your eyes."

She answered swiftly, almost as one speaking in menace of offending words: "What in mine eyes?"

"Why, what I tell you. As though you expected something and were disappointed."

"No more?" she inquired, and repeated it — "No more?"

"No more — no. But I want to know why — or what?"

She gave a gentle laugh and relaxed her attitude that

had been strained, in keeping with her voice. She seemed to have feared he had derived some secret that she had; and she seemed glad and yet a little sad her eyes had not betrayed her. She gave a gentle laugh and threw her hands apart as if to show how small a thing was here.

"Why, little master, there is nothing in that," she said. "The eyes light for that the heart runneth to peep through them as a child to the window."

He laughed at the pleasant fancy: "Well, what did your heart run to see?"

"Nay, I have not done," she told him. "Look also how one may see a child run happily past the window — from the van I have seen it: so sometimes the heart but passeth across the eyes with a glad face, singing from one happy thought to where another waits. I think my heart passed so and thou didst catch the gleam."

He heard her take in a quick breath as her words ended. Then, "Suffer me to go now," she said. "Keep my pretty flowers;" and turned and went swiftly from him down the slope; and was dim where the moonlight faded; and was gone in the further darkness.

CHAPTER VII

ALONE ON PLOWMAN'S RIDGE

I

SHE was as quickly gone from Percival's mind as from his sight. Now that he was free and alone — as he had wished to be alone — he faced about with an abrupt movement and began to set homewards at a swift pace along the Ridge; simultaneously his mind returned to his own business.

He had reached a sudden determination while he talked with Japhra; he found his mind carried forward to the scenes of its prosecution, and he was made to breathe deeply and to walk fast as he visioned them. A conflict possessed him and tore at him as he went. Before he got to bed that night he would have from Aunt Maggie what she purposed for his future — he would have it in definite words — he would not be put off by vague generalisations — he would accept nothing in the nature of "next year will be time enough to decide" — nay, nor "next month," nor "next week" — he would have it definitely, clearly, unmistakably now. That was his determination; thence arose the conflict. He assured himself as he walked that let him but know Aunt Maggie's intentions, and however cruel, however impossible, however unendurable they might be, he would follow wise Japhra's advice — would meet in the ring as if it were a physical antagonist the passionate impulse to reward all kind Aunt Maggie's love by violent refusal to obey her — would meet and would defeat it there.

He threw up his head as he so thought and had his fists clenched and his jaw set. The action made him conscious of old friend wind. At this the pitch of his heat, "Ha! Ha! Ha!" shouted old friend wind in his ears. "Accept idleness if Aunt Maggie so desires, will you? — and the laughter and contempt, eh? Ha! Ha! Ha!"

He put down his head again. The wind was getting up; it took some buffeting.

He began to reason now that he should have argued with Japhra when Japhra laid down the law of self-discipline and moral conduct.

"You can't make one rule to cover everything!" he said aloud, driving along against the wind. "A man must do something with his life!" he cried.

He suddenly realised that he was dallying; he suddenly knew that he was weakening. He was persuading himself that the hour of the fight would fall when he questioned Aunt Maggie; he suddenly realised that the battle was already begun.

II

The knowledge brought him to a dead halt. His thoughts had fallen in train with his steps: he had the feeling that he was being beaten while he walked — only could be master of himself while he stood still and centred all his faculties on defeating the impulses that goaded him as they had goaded him earlier in the day. As the sufferer on a sick-bed tosses wearily through the sleepless night and comes from weariness to savage groans and curses that rest is not to be found nor a cool position discovered, so he lashed in spirit to find a stable thought that would support him amid the tumult that possessed him. He strove to image Aunt Maggie with gentle eyes; he could

command no more than a glimpse before she was presented to him again as not understanding — not understanding! — unkind, unkind! He directed his mind at Japhra and strove to see how small a thing, how childish, how petty was his trouble; in a moment, "Preposterous! preposterous!" shouted the tumult. "A small thing to others? Easy for them to think that. Let them apply it to their own concerns! How can they judge what is your affair alone? If you are struck, can they feel your pain? If you are starving, can they measure your hunger?" And again, with greater cunning: "Why, what a damnable philosophy is this that calls upon a man to suffer any rebuke, and smile and submit, and declare it is a small thing, unworthy of notice, and cover himself with sophistries as that life is too big, the sea too deep, the hills too high, for such an affair to cause affront! What, is that a man's part, do you think? A man's part — or a coward's?"

"Not the right way to put it!" Percival struggled. "A false way to look at it!"

And his adversary, with deeper cunning yet: "Is it fight you would, as Japhra bade you? You did not explain all the circumstances to him. A man must do something with his life — he admitted that. Is it fight you would? Why, fight then! Choose your own life. Make your own life. For that a man should fight! Get into the world and prove yourself a man! You are no better than a baby here — worse than a baby; you're a lout. What sort of a lout will you be in another year or so? What will they think of you then? Ah, go on; make this precious ring-business of your life. Rebuke yourself — your natural desires, your rightful ambitions; win your fight as Japhra bade you win it, and then when all laugh at you or ignore you for a con-

temptible lout — then tell them, tell all the village what a rare prize you have really won — tell it to Rollo, tell it to Dora!"

The poor boy cried aloud: "Oh, these infernal thoughts! These infernal thoughts! If only I could get them out of my head — think of something else!" He was going mad over it, he told himself. His head ached — ached. It would all come right — there was no cause for all this worrying. He had often thought about it before — never till now, till to-day, this wild, maddening, throbbing fury of trouble. What was it? What was it that caused these feelings and all this pain — why, why was he so taxed and tormented? If only he could get it out of his mind, could think of something else till he got home! There would be the jolly, jolly little supper with Aunt Maggie awaiting him; after it they would talk quietly, happily together, and he would tell her how he really must be doing something, and she would understand and everything would be put right. If only he could get it out of his mind — if he went back now as he was, why, he was not in a fit state of mind to go near her — and why? why? why this sudden difference, this sudden, maddening, throbbing state that goaded and tortured like a wild live thing within his brain? why?

III

More reasoned thoughts these — at least a consciousness of his condition and an attempt to plumb its cause. More reasoned thoughts — and they brought him suddenly to a calmer moment and there to the answer he sought: Dora.

He was not far in person from the very spot where earlier in the day the vision of her had come to him and

he had breathed her name and had her name come floating about him—Dora! Dora! Dora! soft as rose petals fall, sweet as they. He was not far in person from that spot—realising her in spirit he was aswoon again in that vision's ecstasy; and suddenly knew what reason urged his burning mood, and suddenly discovered why he burned to do. She the sweet cause of all this new distress!—hers the dear fault that life was now thus changed!

Further than that he might not go—nor cared to seek. It was not his—nor ever belongs to youth suddenly under the sex attraction—to know a new ichor was mingled with his blood, causing it to surge and boil and test the very fibre of his veins. Not his to know a sap that had been storing in his vigour was now released whence it had stored—touching new strengths that had not yet been felt; flushing the brain in cells not yet aroused; and crying, and crying to be relieved; and causing in his strength a tingling vibrancy, as a willow rod that has been bent springs upright and vibrates when its constraint is cut. Not his to know, nor care to seek, how love manifested itself within him, nor what love was, nor why he loved, nor if, indeed, love were this sudden thing. He only knew that what had served his boyhood could not suffice now Dora filled his mind; he only knew that in all the world to bring to Dora's eyes the light of admiration was his sole desire; he only knew that to have her hold him in contempt—even in slight regard—was to endure an outrage unendurable; he only knew he was possessed to challenge mighty businesses—of arms, of strength, of courage, of riches—that he might win her smile.

He had the new thoughts now for which he had cried while the tumult of right and wrong conduct vexed him. She filled his mind, suffused his being, stood with her

exquisite face before his eyes. Peace in the guise of ardour came where conflict in passion's flame had burned. "If only I could see her before I go home!" he thought.

The recollection came of a hot day earlier in the week when, at lunch with Dora and Rollo at the Old Manor, they had conspired to abuse the sultry weather. "But the evenings are worth it," Dora had said. "In London it is different;" with her mother she had just come from London for a few days at Abbey Royal before she went, for her last term, to the "finishing" school near Paris. "In London it is different — often more stifling at night than in the day. But here! Here the evenings are worth it. Always after dinner I stroll in the garden — and love it."

If only he could see her before he went home! He looked at his watch beneath the moonlight. Almost nine o'clock it told him. That would be about her hour. He could strike across to Abbey Royal in fifteen minutes if he ran. There was just the chance! — just the chance of a glimpse of her, the first glimpse since this new and adorable sense of her had come to be his. He might even speak with her — hear her voice. Hear her voice! — it was the utmost desire he had in all the world! There was just the chance! — if it failed, still he could see the home where she lived, see it with the new eyes that now were his — her home, the grounds her feet had trod, the gates her hand had touched, the flowers perhaps her dress had brushed or she had stooped to breathe.

There was just the chance! — along the Ridge, down to Upabbot, behind the church and so to her home. His mind leapt across his route, eager to urge his pace. He pocketed his watch and set towards the shrine that had his heart.

CHAPTER VIII

WITH DORA IN THE DRIVE

I

THERE was just the chance! "Ah, Chance be kind!" his prayer, but in the simpler form: "If only I can see her!" For he could not have told himself precisely what he desired of her. The new condition of mind and body that possessed him was too newly come for him clearly to understand towards what it impelled him. We speak of love as an intoxication. He was as it were beneath the first and sudden influence of a draught of wine more potent than the drinker knows — causing an elevation of the spirits, that is to say, a sharper note in the surroundings, something of a singing in the ears; a readiness for adventure, but not a clear notion as to the form of adventure required; a sudden comprehension that there is more tingling stuff in life than ever the dull round has revealed; but a sense that it is there and must be found rather than an exact knowledge of what it will prove to be. He only knew he wished to see her; that seemed the goal; he had no thoughts nor fancies to take him to what might lie beyond — then reached the Abbey gates and saw the drive, and saw her there, and stopped as if a hand suddenly rebuked him in the throat.

That he felt a surge run through his being and flame upon his face, that he felt suddenly abashed and could not dare to make his presence known — these marked his nearness to knowledge of his state.

II

The night was very clear. By now the full moon had disdained more trifling with the clouds that earlier had joined hands about her. Far to the west they trailed their watery burdens to the hills: she queened above them — queenly serene, aloof in the unbounded vault that all her empery of stars about her ruled and divided subject to her rule. The Abbey gates stood wide. Between their pillars little breezes came to him and brought to him the fragrance of the flowers that banked the drive on either hand. He saw they also stirred the dress and some light scarf that Dora wore.

Mystery was here. He knew not what — only that, conditioned by some new sense that caused him strangeness, he was upon the threshold of things as yet unknown.

He watched — afraid as yet. She was stooped above a cluster of pansies. While he looked, she plucked a blossom here and there, her hand now hovering above their shade and now caressed amid their bloom, and raised them to her face.

She turned then and came towards him; and he drew back a step. Mystery was here; not yet, not yet to challenge what it held!

She reached the gates and paused a moment. The little breezes that had brought the flowers to him stopped their play; her scarf's floating ends — gossamer and delicately painted — came softly to her sides. You might have said that the night airs had heralded her here, had taken form in her scarf's ends to attend her as she walked, and now awaited which way she should please to move.

Snow-White-and-Rose-Red! The childish appreciation of her, aroused in him years before, returned to him

again. Snow-White-and-Rose-Red — that was she! As when a child he had been caused a childish wonder and a child's unspoilt delight at so rare a thing as she appeared to him, so now, seeing her for the first time with the new eyes that belonged to his new condition, he felt himself amazed and almost awed that beauty could have this degree. Snow-White-and-Rose-Red! All she had promised in her girlish years dowered her now in the burgeoning of her maidenhood — and dowered more than it had told, as all the beauty of the opening bud scarcely can hint the opened blossom's beauty; and dowered more than it had told by the increasing strangeness, as she grew, of this rare perfection of each feature in one face. Rare, strangely rare, the transparent fairness of her skin; rare, rare that almost crimson shade on either cheek, sharply defined, not blended, as it were frozen there; rare the dark pansy of her wide and stilly eyes; rare, most rare of all, transcending all, the high air with which she bore herself — that her chaste and faultless face maintained, with which her eyes looked and that her presence seemed to make.

He saw her dress. He saw her scarf to be some filmy veil about her shoulders and that beneath it all her throat was bare. He saw that it was turned about her throat in a loose fold that lay where her bosom was disclosed by the silk evening gown she wore, draped low, but maidenly discreet. At throat, at breast, at arms, at hands, he saw this filmy thing was challenged of its whiteness and seemed to take a shade.

She moved; he thought to speak. Mystery was here and held him on its threshold.

Watching her he had a sudden new conception of her quality. Later, when he had spoken to her, when he had left her, when he trod again each passage of their meeting,

recalled her voice, her mode of speech, and how she bore herself, he recalled that conception and knew it was most proper to her, and thrilled to know it so.

As he looked, and afterwards as he remembered, he conceived the word that estimated all her beauty, all her quality and her degree — frozen. Frozen and thus invested with the strange rareness that frozen beauty has. Frozen and thus most proper that those flames upon her cheeks never could stain beyond themselves, as blood that will not run in snow; proper the quaint precision of the words she used, as icicles broken in a cold hand; proper the high pitch of her voice, curiously hard, without modulations, as winter sounds are hard.

Snow-White-and-Rose-Red — and frozen snow and frozen red. She was that in his new discovery of her: and was that better than he knew; caparisoned and trained for that.

III

She raised to her face the pansies he had seen her gather, caressed them a moment against her lips, then turned and went a few steps back. And then he spoke — stepped from the pillar's shadow and into mystery's doors and called her — "Dora!"

The little breezes ran among the flowers: "Bend! Bend! you sleepy things and blow her your caresses where she moves again!" — ran among the tree-tops high above the borders: "Salute! Salute! you sentinels, and show your joy, she comes!" — chased from her path a daring leaf or two — sprung to her person and bade her veil attend her — caught his low whisper and tossed it from her ears.

Tiny the stir; yet stiller all the voice he made. He

waited; breathed her name again — "Dora!" and then she heard.

She gave the faintest start; turned, and said, "Why — Percival?" and then a little laugh, and then spoke "Percival!" again.

He went to her. "Did I frighten you? I'm sorry."

He went into the mystery that barred him at the gate. Her surprise caused the shades upon her cheeks to flame to sudden crimson, promoting her beauty to its most high effect. Her lips — also of her surprise — were lightly parted, alert, with the aspect of some nymph of the woods and glades, startled and poised to listen. Not yet, not yet his to know all the truth of what influence had him here. He only had known he wished to see her: he only knew now that he wished to stay and talk with her. He was in the mystery — not yet of it; but already, at this first contact with her presence, a glimmering, a suspicion arose — softened his voice, quickened his senses.

"I ought to have been frightened," she said. "I never heard you come. But I scarcely was startled. It is the most curious circumstance, but I happened to be thinking of you."

As icicles broken in a cold hand!

He did not cry, as love might have directed him — "Thinking of me! You!" Not yet, not yet the knowledge that would give that ardour. He only was boyishly pleased. He only said: "Were you, Dora? I'm awfully glad you were."

And she, no more aware of deeper things than he: "Well, they were not particularly nice thoughts I had of you," she said, and gave a little laugh that toned with the clear pitch of her voice. "Indeed, I was vexed with you."

He laughed back an easy laugh: "I wonder what I've done?"

"It is what you have not done, Percival — or did not do. I was at the Manor all the afternoon and had the dullest time that anybody could imagine. Your fault. Rollo was expecting you to tea, and was looking out for you all the time, and was the most ungracious person. To me, you know, it is ridiculous how he seems to dote upon you."

And Percival laughed brightly again. Happy, happy to be with her — alone, alone at this hour, in this still place! "Old Rollo!" he laughed. "Well, anyway, if I failed him, I've seen you."

She asked him, "But why have you come — so late?" and at that his laughter left him.

"I wanted to see you," he said. "I don't know why," and paused.

He did not know; but in declaring it to her, and in that pause, came a step nearer discovery. Some nameless reason held his speech, and, while she waited, fluttered in his eyes and communicated its influence to her also. In that pause suspicion came to both of some strange element that trembled in the air — fugitive, remote, but causing its presence to be known as a scent declares itself upon the breeze. She saw a tinge of redness kindle in his face. He saw the faintest trace of deepening colour in the shades upon her cheeks.

Not yet, not yet the truth! Transient the spell and quickly gone. Only, a little shaken by it, "You're going away soon, Dora," he said. "I think that's why I came."

Free of it: "But that's not a reason," she answered him lightly. "I am not going so suddenly — not till the end of the week."

"Saturday — it's the day after to-morrow."

"Ah, well, time goes so slowly here."

"Dull for you — I can imagine that. To this French school, are you going, Dora? I heard you telling Lady Burdon of it."

"It's not a school. No more school for me, and I am very thankful."

"Tell me what you do there."

She went into a sudden break of laughter. She had somewhere picked up a single vulgar phrase that consorted most strangely with her precise manner of speech. "Your coming here like this," she laughed, "and asking such very funny things!" — then used her phrase — "it tickles me to death."

The piquancy of it delighted him, and he laughed delightedly, and for some reason had a stronger sense of her rare beauty. Not yet, not yet the truth, but nearer yet, even as such truth advances by the strangest and most secret steps.

"Tell me, though, Dora!"

"Oh, how it can interest you I am puzzled to imagine! Pleasant enough things, then. There are twelve of us there, all English, I am glad to say. We never speak English, though — always French; and then there are German and Italian days; they make us laugh very much."

As icicles broken in the hand!

Her laughter had caused the shades on her cheek to glow. He gazed at her in sheerest admiration; felt a new stirring of his blood; felt his breath quicken. She was close, close to him. The little breezes that had attended her, and had gone as if asulk at his intrusion, came with a sudden little fury to win her back again, and smote him full with all the fragrance that she had, and tossed her scarf and tossed her skirt against him.

She drew back her skirt, using the hand that held the pansies she had gathered. The action brushed his hand with hers and with her flowers.

Not yet, not yet the truth, but almost come! He slipped his fingers about her wrist, holding her hand mid-breast between them. "Give me those flowers, Dora."

She slower in approaching it, but suspicious again of some strange element in the air, as a fawn that lifts a doubtful head to question a new thing in the breeze. "You have one buttonhole already," she told him, her voice not very easy.

He looked down at Ima's wild rose in his coat. "That's nothing," he said, and began to remove it whence it was pinned.

He was clumsy, for his hand trembled — the other still had hers. He was clumsy. Thoughts, thoughts, were at hammer in his brain — new to him, fierce to him and, as from iron in a forge, striking a glow that glowed within his eyes.

She saw the glow, saw how his hand shook. "It is well fastened," she said.

He broke off the rose at its head, jerked it aside and drew down the stalk. She suffered him to take her flowers, and very carefully then he placed them where the rose had been — hers! hers! That she had plucked! That she had held! He was at the truth and he looked at her.

She almost there.

The glow in his eyes was turned full upon her and she stepped back from it. The secret thing the night had was full about her and she had alarm of it. "I find it rather chilly standing here," she said, " — and late. I must be going in."

He watched her take the veil about her shoulders

another turn about her throat, and watched her move away a pace. He started after her as though he burst through bonds that held him. He walked beside her, moving his tongue in his mouth as though it were locked from words and sought them; and he could hear his heart knock.

So, without words — in silence that shouted louder than speech — they came to where the drive bent towards the house. She paused, and he knew his dismissal.

His face was red, as a child reddens when control of tears is on the edge of breaking. His voice, when he spoke, had a strained note as the voice is caused to strain when only one thought can be spoken and a hundred press for speech. And strange — as between them — the words at last he found: "Dora, you'd hate a man — wouldn't you? — with nothing — who just poked along and did nothing?"

It was the door that should introduce her to the knowledge wherein he struggled. But she was only surprised, not recognising it; and surprised, relieved indeed. "Any one would," she said.

He flung wide the door. "Ah! Do you suppose I am going to?"

IV

Love is an instinct and is played by instinct. Struggling in the knowledge, in the mystery, that had drawn him here and that now engulfed him, he scarcely yet was aware that he loved, but by instinct was put in command of all the cunning of the game. His question fronted her with personal issue between them; it is the first, the last, the essential strategy.

"Why, Percival!" she said and stopped — saw the door wide; and he saw the colour deepen where her

colour lay. "Why, Percival, why ever should I suppose it of you?"

He could control his voice no more. The strained note went. He said thickly: "But you'll begin to think it. In time you're bound to — if I let you. And then scorn me. If I just idled here you're bound to scorn me. Any one would — you said it."

Nervous her breathing. "But you — you never could be like that, Percival. I've always thought of you as doing things. Every one thinks it. I have noticed how they do."

All the distress he had suffered earlier in the day was back with him now, joined in fiercest tumult with what caused his heart to knock. He cried "They soon won't!" and cried it on a bitter note that made her go an unthinking step towards what waited her. "Percival, they always will," she said. "I always will, Percival."

The redness went from his face. His own clear voice came back to him. All, all his being braced from storm to his control. He breathed "Dora! Will you?"

The stress that had been his was hers. She found no words; she only nodded — moved her lips for "yes" but made no sound. He had come slowly to the truth, by blundering ways that sometimes brought him near and sometimes went astray. She was suddenly come — and come, not of herself, but of as it were a flame that his voice as he spoke, his ardour as he bent towards her, seemed to communicate. She was suddenly come, was a degree bewildered, wanted even yet some further light. She only nodded.

"Dora, you are going for a long time. I heard you tell —"

She said very low: "For a year."

"Dora! A year!"

"I am to be a year away. It is the last time. It is to finish."

"A year! A year! Oh, Dora, a year!"

Her face was close to his, her lips a shade apart, her wide eyes lifted to him. Rare, rare he had thought her; perfect he knew her. That mystic thing the night had held, held them mute, magnetised, privy from all the world, alone. They stood so close the air he drew had first caressed her. They stood so close that her young bosom almost told him how she breathed. Slowly, as he were drawn to it, he stooped towards her; steadily, as she were held, she suffered his face to approach. Their lips touched, stayed for a space—smaller, infinitely less, than mind can conceive; wider, immeasurably more, as their joined spirits reckoned time, and rushed through time in bliss of ecstasy, than mind can reckon space.

And then he kissed her.

Crimson she flamed in the places of her colour—flaming and more flaming and deeper yet their flame. Their sharp limitations drove her driven white about them; from throat to flame and flame to brow as lily was her hue. She did not move nor speak, and he, amazed before her rareness, drew back a step. She might have been a statue, so still she stood. She might not have breathed, nor thought, so motionless her breast, her eyes so wide, so still her gaze. Only that glowing scarlet on her cheeks, only her skin's transparency—soft, deep, as if beneath it some jewel gave a secret light—declared her mortal and proclaimed she lived.

A space passed. She came from the trance in which she seemed to be. She gave a little sigh. As if she had been struck, not kissed; as if she had been robbed, not possessed. "Oh! Percival!" she said.

And he: "Oh! Dora!"

He sprung to her, took both her hands; clasped them in his and adored her with his eyes; bent his head to them and raised them to his lips.

"Oh, Dora, have I hurt you? Oh, Dora, I love you so!"

"Let me go in, Percival!"

He held her hands against his breast. "I could not help it! I could not help it! I love you, Dora! I've always loved you! I suddenly knew I'd always loved you!"

She spoke so low he scarcely could hear her voice: "Percival, let me go in!"

"Oh, Dora, have I hurt you? Dear, dear Dora, you are all the world to me. I love you so, I love you so!"

The faintest movement of her head gave him his answer and gave him ecstasy.

"I have not hurt you? You are not angry? I knew — or I would not have kissed you. Speak to me, dear Dora."

She only whispered: "Percival, I would like to go in. I am afraid."

He cried: "I know. You are so beautiful — so beautiful; not meant for me to love you."

"You are hurting my hands, Percival."

He kissed her hands again — fragile and white and cold and scented, like crushed, cold flowers in his grasp. He told her: "From the very first I loved you — but could not know it then. From that day when I first saw you! Look how I must have been born to love you — you'll not be frightened then. Snow-White-and-Rose-Red I called you. Smile, darling Dora, as you smiled when I told you in the muddy lane that day. Do you remember?"

She had no smile: still seemed aswoon, still scarcely breathed, as some bewildered dove — captured, past fluttering — which only quivers in the hands that hold it.

"If only you can sometimes think of me. You will understand then and think again perhaps, and know all my life is changed, and know that everything I do I shall do for you. I'll not see you again. I'll not be here when you come back."

At that he felt her fingers move within his hands.

"I cannot stay here now — now that I love you. I shall go."

He felt her tremble, and she breathed: "Oh, why? Oh, where?"

"How could I face you again and still be idling here? I don't know where, Dora. I only know why — because I love you so. Anywhere, anything to get me something that will give you to me!"

She whispered "Percival!" and stopped as though she had not strength for more. And he breathed "Dora!" as though he knew what she would say and by intensity of love would draw it from her.

She slowly drew her hands from his. She took them to her breast, and faltered again — again as she were wounded, afraid, struck, threatened, atremble at some fearful brink, robbed of some vital virtue: "Oh, Percival!" and caught her breath and said "Oh, Percival, what is it — this?"

"It is love!" he cried. "Dora, it is love!"

She gave a little sigh; she unclasped her hands; seemed to relax in all her spirit; suffered her hands, like cold white flowers floating earthwards, lovewards to float to his.

"Tell me!" he breathed.

Soft as her hands fell, "I always shall think of you," she told him.

He besought her "Tell me!"

She whispered "Always!"

In a man's voice, out of a sudden and terrible review of his condition — possessed of nothing, chained to do nothing — and of her high estate: "Others will love you!" he cried.

As they would nestle there and there abide, her fingers moved within his hands.

In a man's voice, full man as full love makes, "Tell me," he besought her.

Scarcely perceptible her answer came; scarcely her lips moved for it — faint as the timid breeze ventured to the innermost thicket, soft as the hushed caress of summer rain along the hedgerows, "I shall always love you," she breathed.

Shortly he left her.

CHAPTER IX

WITH AUNT MAGGIE IN FAREWELL

I

It was past eleven when Percival got back to "Post Offic." He had been absent seven hours. He felt himself removed by thrice as many years from the moment when he had flung away from Aunt Maggie to work off by active exercise the feelings aroused in him when, to his demands that he must be doing something with his life, she had prayed him only wait.

Day then, night now, and he as changed.

The mood he brought her was unlike any he had proposed should be his case. On Plowman's Ridge before he saw Japhra he had imagined for his return a petulant, a trying-to-be-calm scene in which he should repeat his purpose that an end must be made of the purposeless way of life in which she was keeping him. By Fir-Tree Pool, with wise Japhra propounding how a man must encourage his spirit and defeat his flesh, he had imagined himself gentle with dear Aunt Maggie; gently showing her what restlessness had him, persuading her to his ends, or, of his love for her, accepting her wishes. Now he was come back and neither case was his. Day then, night now, and he as changed. Now he had lived that hour with Dora in the drive; now he had kissed her; now had heard her breathe "I shall always love you." Gone every thought of petulant distress; gone Japhra's counsels — gone boyhood, manhood come!

The change was stamped upon his face, figured in his air. Aunt Maggie looked up eagerly as he entered. She had waited him anxiously. He stood a moment on the threshold of the room and looked at her with steady, reckoning eyes. She saw; and she greeted him fearfully. "Why, Percival, dear, how very late you are," she said.

He replied: "It took me longer to get back than I expected."

His tone matched his aspect and the look in his eyes. Aunt Maggie's voice trembled a little: "You must have been a long way, dear?"

"A good many miles," he said, and came forward and went to his place at the table where supper was laid, and sat down.

"Are you very tired, dear? — you look tired."

"No — no, thank you, Aunt Maggie."

His voice was absent — or stern; and absently — or sternly — he looked at her across the table.

She caught her breath and hesitated, and began pathetically to try by brightness to rally him from his mood.

"At least you must be terribly hungry," she smiled. "Here comes Honor with just what you like."

A tray tanged against the door, and was borne in by Honor, uncommonly grim of the face.

"Now wasn't that clever of Honor!" Aunt Maggie went on. "Five minutes ago — after waiting since seven — she said she knew you would be just in time if she began to cook the trout then; and here it is ready, and most delicious, I'm sure, just as you arrive."

Honor's actual words had been: "Time and tide wait for no dangerous delays, Miss Oxford, and I don't neither — not a single instant longer. I'll put these

troutses on now which ought to have been on at ten minutes to seven, and I'll cook 'em, and cook 'em and cook 'em till I drop fainting on my own kitchen carpet and till they're nasty black cinders that will serve him right. Lost his way! lost his nasty bold temper! It's no good talking different to me, Miss, not if your voice was tinkling trumpets, it isn't!" She had burst in with her tray prepared to repeat her wrath to Percival's face, but caught the appealing look in Aunt Maggie's eyes, perceived that something was seriously amiss with Percival, and exchanged her heat for the affection he had won in her from the first moment, years before, of his arrival — the sweetest bundle of shawls — at "Post Offic."

"Cooked to a turn, Master Percival, dear," Honor said, uncovering before him the steaming dish.

"And only just caught," Aunt Maggie smiled. "Rollo brought them in just before supper time."

And Honor: "And want it you do, as I can see. Nasty pinched look you've got, Master Percival."

And Aunt Maggie: "And look at that beer, dear. You'd scarcely think it was a new cask, would you? As clear as crystal."

And Honor: "Ah, 'Pitch that cask about,' I says to the man when he delivered it. 'Pitch that cask about, my beauty, and you can pitch it back into your waggin', I says. 'Young master don't want to eat his beer with a knife and fork, not if you do,' I says sharp."

And Aunt Maggie: "You see what care we take of you, Percival, although you leave us all day long."

And Honor: "And now I'll just get your slippers down for you. Nothing like slippers when you're tired. And then you'll be to rights."

II

So these fond women, perceiving him amiss, strove, as women will, to heal him with their sympathy; and reckoned nothing — as is woman's part — that he nothing responded to their gentleness nor anything abated his set and brooding air. The world may be chased up and down to find men conspired to soothe a woman's brow and scarcely will disclose a single case. Men weary or wax impatient of such a task. But every household at some time shows women gently engaged against a bearish man. It is the woman's part — womanly as we say: using a rare word for a beautiful virtue.

At another time — in the days before that evening's magic, in the life that preceded his present only by that hour in the drive with Dora — Percival had long been won from moodiness by their solicitude for him. Not now! Those days were only a single hour gone; its events sundered them from the present by an abyss that had a lifetime's depth, a lifetime's breadth from marge to marge. New feelings were his and they enveloped him against old appeals as a suit of mail against arrows. New prospects held his eyes and they blotted out homelier visions as the changed scene of a play is dropped across an earlier background. He was not preoccupied and therefore unaware of the loving sentences addressed to him. His case was this — that he was a new man, and as a stranger, therefore, listening to affections that did not concern him. That he found himself insensible to their appeal was not that he loved Aunt Maggie less or had suffered abatement of the affection he had for hot-tongued, warm-hearted Honor. None of these. It was this only — that he loved another more; this only — that the fires of his love had sprung out in a

new place and there burned with heat infinitely more fierce than the flame where formerly his affections had warmed their hands.

III

Such of his meal as he required — and that was what habit, not appetite, demanded — he ate in silence. To silence also Aunt Maggie went, shortly after Honor had left them. She attempted once or twice to continue to persuade him from his mood — protested that he was eating nothing; sought to rally him with little scraps of gossip, with questions touching his afternoon. Of no avail. Presently she clasped her hands together on the table before him, and only watched him, and only sought to discover from his face what thing it was his face betided, and only felt her fears increase.

When he was done he pushed back his chair and she dropped her eyes, for his were now upon her and had the steady, reckoning look she had observed — and feared — when he regarded her for that moment at his entrance. She could not endure the feeling that he watched her, and watched her so. "You will go to bed soon, Percival," she said. "You do look so tired."

He replied: "I am not tired. I have something to ask you first, Aunt Maggie;" and after a pause he went on: "Aunt Maggie, I was telling you this afternoon that I thought I ought to be doing something. Well, more than that I thought I ought to be doing something, and more than merely telling you — because I know I was in a great state about it and went off in a great state."

She answered, "Yes, Percival?"

"You said there was plenty of time for that."

"Yes, Percival."

"There isn't, Aunt Maggie." And he went on quickly: "there isn't plenty of time to think about what I am going to do. I am not a boy any longer. Even if I started to-morrow I should be starting late. Every one at my age is doing something."

His tone was firm and quiet but was kind. She said that which made it take a harder note.

"Percival, you need only wait," she said, "till you are twenty-one."

She saw his face darken in a change as swift and chill as sudden shadow along the sea. "Oh, that!" he cried. "That! I don't want to hear that any more or ever again! Is that all you have for me?"

She clasped and unclasped her hands on the table before her. He waited several moments for her answer. Then he said: "And what am I to do till then?"

She told him: "Only wait with me, Percival."

He said very quietly: "No, I will not wait. I will not stay with you. I am going away."

The stress that each suffered was broken out of them by his announcement. The thought of losing him, the thought of how a word, revealing her secret, would keep him, broke from her in her cry: "No, no, Percival! Oh, Percival, no!"

Her sudden voice and its anguish smote him to his depths in his own stress as a sudden cry in the night that shocks the heart. He uttered in a voice she had never heard — most hoarse, most atremble: "Oh, understand! For pity's sake try to understand. I am so that I will never sleep again — never again till I have earned my sleep. Oh, understand that I am a man!"

She saw his dear face, his handsome face, his face

that she loved so and was to lose unless she spoke, all twisted up as though he writhed in pain. She cried: "Percival, don't look like that. I can keep you. I cannot let you go."

He looked at her with eyes that told his anguish of this scene and of his spirit. "You cannot keep me," he said. "I am going."

She breathed: "By telling you I can keep you."

He said: "Tell me, then."

She began, her tongue heavy as a key is rusty that is to turn in a lock closed eighteen years; "Rollo —" she began, and stopped.

He had for a moment believed that she intended to tell him this matter affecting his future that he knew must be delusion — some wonderful plan, as wonderful as impossible, such as a woman leading Aunt Maggie's retired life might have — whose delusion, having it before him, he could at last show her. But at her "Rollo," disappointed, he broke out, "Oh, what has old Rollo to do with it?"

Her voice was making a stumbling effort to hold on at turning the key. But his "Old Rollo" caused her to halt, afraid, as one turning a key in very fact might halt and draw back at a footstep.

He saw her face go grey with the hue of ashes. "Aunt Maggie!" he cried, and got up quickly and went to her. "I don't mean to be unkind. I must go. I cannot stay. But I'm not going angry — not running away. I love you — love you, you know how I love you. Just think of it as going on a visit. It's no more than that. I'm going with old Japhra — that's not like going, being with him, is it?"

She just said: "When, dear?"

"Darling, in the morning. At daybreak."

IV

She began to cry, and clung to him. But it was more than losing him had made that ashy hue in her face that had wrung his heart. It was realisation of a sudden thing that menaced her revenge — a thing suddenly arisen in its long, long path whose end she now was reaching. Thinking, when the hour came, the more dreadfully to strike Lady Burdon, she had deliberately made possible and had encouraged the friendship between Percival and Rollo. Had she gone too far? What when she told Percival and he saw it was "Old Rollo" he was to displace, "Old Rollo" upon whom he was to bring disaster — what if —?

She dared not so much as finish that question.

CHAPTER X

WITH EGBERT IN FREEDOM

I

In the morning when he came early to her room, she was easier and able only to suffer her distress at losing him. Thoughts had come to her, helping her; and helping her the more in that they were of a part with the fatalism which had assured her at Audrey's death-bed that nothing could go wrong in her scheme. His resolve to go away was surely, she thought, fate's contribution to her success. Always she had planned for twenty-one — when he should be of age, and qualified himself to avenge his mother. Last night, in agony at losing him, she had nearly robbed herself of that. Fate, in guise of her panic realisation of his affection for Rollo, had interfered to stop her. Last night she had thought it insupportable to be left without him. While she lay sleepless — and heard her darling pacing his floor in the next room — fate had again encouraged her heart by showing her that this was well, not ill — that this was fate working for her; well that he should now, in the last period, be separated from Rollo.

Thus supported she was saved from the uttermost extremity of the collapse that came upon her when fondly he kissed her as she lay in bed, left her, returned to press her to him again. — "Think of it as a visit, Aunt Maggie, only that. Just a visit to give these idle whacking great hands something to do" — and then was gone.

One or two — up thus early — who saw him go by and came to Aunt Maggie when it was noised that he had gone away, told her how stern he looked — how strange. Miss Purdie, early in her garden, had noticed it. "Oh, Miss Oxford, if I had *known!* Oh, to *think* he was going when I saw him! Oh, and I *suspected* something was wrong. There was *something* in his face I had *never* seen there before. I thought to myself 'Now *what* is the matter with you, I wonder?' And I *stood* and *looked* after him, and dropped one of my garden gloves and never *knew* I had lost it until I was back in the house and found I had only *one* to take off. Oh, when I *think* of all his sweet ways and his handsome face. . . ."

II

Stern he looked and strange, and stern his thoughts and difficult. His plans ran to coming up with Japhra on the Dorchester Road and joining him. Beyond? — he could supply nothing beyond. His urgent desire went to being away from home, and for his own respect and for his mind's ease working to earn his food. Beyond? — he could see nothing beyond. His thoughts and all his heart and all his being went to his Dora, to her exquisite beauty, to the rapture of their kiss, to the divine ecstasy of her whisper, "I shall always love you;" beyond? — black, black beyond, most utter black, most utter hopeless; emptiness most utter, mock most shrill, most sharp.

He laughed, poor boy; and "Fool! Fool!" cried, "abject fool!" He groaned, poor boy, and "Dora! Dora!" cried, "oh! Dora!" He set his teeth, poor boy, and braced his strength; threw up his chin and clenched a fist, and "Somehow! Somehow!" cried, "Somehow!"

Most to be pitied then, poor boy, as old friend wind, in whose path now he came, knew and mocked, or might have known and surely mocked — buffeting him with "Ha! Ha! Ha!" tossing his "Somehow! Somehow!" from his lips and chasing it and tearing it as old friend wind had heard resolves and mocked and tossed and chased and torn them from end to end along its course since mankind first resolving came.

But he was helped by that strong "Somehow!" as by resolve mankind — and youth the most of all — is ever helped. More stern, not less, it made him, but launched a shaft of light into the darkness of that Beyond — showing the adventure, not the desert there; inspiring him that somehow stuff was to be found there that somehow he would wrest to himself, somehow shape and beat to win him fulfilment of all his hopes.

Thus he was in brighter mood when presently he brought the white riband of the Dorchester road into view, in mood bright enough to laugh when, striking towards the spot where he proposed to pick up the van, he saw on a gate there a lank figure, bundle over shoulder, that suggested to him it could be no one but Egbert Hunt. He laughed — then had a tender look in his eyes, for his thoughts, as he made along in the direction of gate and figure, went to Rollo.

III

On his way home, when he had left Dora on the previous night, he had called in at Burdon Old Manor to bid Rollo good-by. Lady Burdon had gone to bed. He found Rollo in the billiard room, Egbert Hunt marking for him, and it was what had passed between them that had emphasised the endearment in his tone when he had said "Old Rollo" to Aunt Maggie.

Tender his look when he recalled how "Old Rollo," hearing he was going away, had dropped his cue and stared at him in blank dismay, then questioned him, and then had listened with twitching mouth when he had cried, "Oh, Rollo, things are so steep for me, old man. I can't explain. I must get out of this, that's all!"

For the first time — and the only time — in all their friendship it had been Rollo's to play the supporter. "Why, Percival, dear, dear old chap," he had cried, "don't look like that. For God's sake, don't. Whatever's wrong I can help you. We are absolute, absolute pals. No one ever had such a pal as you've been to me — now it's my turn. Stay here with us a bit, old man. Yes, that's what you'll do. Let's fix that, old man. That will make everything right. Everything I've got is yours — you know that, don't you, old man?"

And when he had shaken his head and had explained that it was work — work for his hands he wanted, and was going to find with Japhra, Rollo had vented his feelings on Egbert Hunt with "What the devil are you standing there listening for, Hunt? Get out of this! Didn't I tell you to go? Get out!" And when they were alone, and when he had seen that Percival was not to be moved, had revealed his affection in last words that brought a dimness to Percival's eyes as he recalled them.

"Men don't talk about these things," Rollo had said, "so I've never told you all you are to me — but it's a fact, Percival, that I'm never really happy except when I'm with you. I've been like that ever since we met, and in all the jolly days we've had together. You know the sort of chap I am — quite different from you. I don't get on with other people. I've always hated the idea of going to Cambridge this October because it means

mixing with men I shan't like and leaving you. You're everything to me, old man. It's always been my hope — I don't mind telling you now you're going — that when I settle down, after I come of age — you know what I mean — it's always been my hope that we'll be able to fix it up together somehow. I shall have business and things to look after — you know what I mean — that you can manage a damn sight better than I can. And I'll want some one to look after me — the kind of chap I am; a shy ass, and delicate. And you're the one, the only, only one. Just remember that, won't you, old man? . . ."

IV

Percival was aroused from his warm recollection of it by the figure on the gate hailing him. Egbert Hunt it was. "Good lord!" Percival cried. "What on earth are you doing here — this time in the morning and with that bundle?"

"Coming with you," said Hunt.

"With me! Do you know where I'm going?"

Egbert Hunt pointed up the road where Japhra's van came plodding. "In that. Heard you tell Lord Burdon last night. Heard you say that Mr. Stingo's crowd was short of hands. The life for me. Fac'."

Percival stared at him — a grown man now, lanky, unhealthy, white of face.

"Does Rollo — does Lord Burdon know? Did he say you might go?"

"Told me to go to 'ell."

Percival laughed. "You'll find it that — you frightful ass."

"I'll be free," said Egbert darkly. "No man's slave I won't be any more. Every man's as good as the next

where you're bound, I reckon. No more tyrangs for me. You're my sort, and always have been."

The van was up to them and pulled up with Japhra's surprised hail of greeting. Percival went to him where he sat on the forward platform. "Japhra, here's a hand for one of your crowd — a friend of mine. Is there work for him?"

Japhra looked at Egbert with unveiled belittlement. "There's work for all sorts," he said drily. "For him perhaps. Get up behind," he addressed Egbert. "I'll let old One Eye have a look at thee. He wants a hand."

Percival swung up beside Japhra and smiled good morning at Ima, who had come to the door. "Go on, Japhra."

"That's a poor lot, that friend of thine," said Japhra, clicking his tongue at Pilgrim. "How far dost thou come with us, little master?"

"All the way, Japhra."

Japhra looked at him keenly. "To Dorchester?"

"Farther than that. I'm going to be third lad in your boxing booth, Japhra. Go on; I'll explain."

CHAPTER XI

WITH JAPHRA ON THE ROAD

I

It was two years — near enough — before Percival came again to Burdon Village. Egbert Hunt found work with old One Eye who had the Wild West Rifle Range. Percival became "Japhra's Gentleman" (as the van folk called him), living with Japhra and Ima in the van, and earning his way in Japhra's booth.

A tough life, a quick life, a good life; and he "trained on," as they said in the vans of beast or man or show that, starting fresh, slipped into stride and did well. He trained on. Little room for trouble or for brooding thoughts. Up while yet the day was grey; stiff work in boots and vest and trousers in taking down the booth and loading-up, harnessing and getting your van away before too many kept the dust stirring ahead of you. Keen appetite for the breakfasts Ima cooked, eaten on the forward platform with the van wheels grinding the road beneath. The long, long trail to the next pitch, — now with Ima as she sat, one eye on the horse, the other on her needle, sewing, darning, making; now plodding alongside with Japhra, drinking his quaint philosophy, hearing his strange tales of men and countries, fights and hard trades he had seen. Now forward along the long line of waggons, now dropping back where they trailed a mile down the road; joining this party or that,

chaffing with the brown-faced girls or walking with the men and listening to their tales of their craft and of their lives. Sometimes the road from pitch to pitch was short; then the midday meal would be taken at the new site and there would be an hour's doze before the booths were set up and business begun. Usually the journey took the greater part of the day — frequently without a halt — and work must begin immediately on arrival; the boxing booth built up — first the platform on which Percival and Japhra, Ginger Cronk and Snowball White paraded to attract the crowd — a thing of boards and trestles, the platform, that by sheer sweating labour must be made to lie even and stable whatever the character of the ground; three uprights at either end that sometimes must be forced into soil iron hard and sometimes must be coaxed to hold firm in marshy bog. The booth itself to be rigged then — the wooden framework that must be lashed and nailed and screwed; the wide lengths of canvas eyeletted for binding together; stakes for the ring to be driven in; seats to be bolted together and covered — and all at top, top speed with a mouthful of nails and screws and "Who in hell's got that mallet?" and "A hand here! a hand sharp! Blast her! she's slipped again!" and many a bruised finger and always a sweating back. And then sharp, sharp into the flannels, and out with the gloves; and parade till the booth was full; and spar exhibition rounds alleged to be for weighty purses; and fight all the challengers from the crowd four rounds apiece, any weight; and top-up with a stiff six rounds announced by Snowball White: "A sporting gentleman having put up a purse for knock-out or win on points match between Ginger Cronk, ten stun champion of the west, — who beat Curly Hawkins in eight rounds, knocked out Alf Jacobs after a desperate ding-

dong o' fourteen rounds, defeated Young Philipps in five rounds, and Jew Isaacs in sixteen, — and Gentleman Percival, a lad with a future before him, whom you'll be proud to have seen, gentlemen, discovered this summer by Gipsy Japhra, the man who held the light-weight champion belt for four years in America and who has trained with all the great ring heroes, bare-knuckle men, gentlemen, of a glorious Prize Ring period of the past. You are requested to pass no remarks during the progress of this desperate encounter, but to signify appreciation in the usual manner. Gentlemen, Mr. Ginger Cronk, Mr. Gentleman Percival — TIME! —" And so on; and winding up with "a remarkable exhibition in which Gipsy Japhra, partnered by Gentleman Percival, will show the style and methods of the old P. R. gentlemen" — and then back to the platform again, to parade, to fill the booth, to fight — and so till the last visitor had left the fair to night and to its hoarse and worn-out workers.

A tough life, a quick life, a good life; . . . and Percival trained on. At first he had been considerably tasked by the rough and tumble, ding-dong work in the boxing booth following the strenuous labour of the day, with no time lost between pitch and pitch. Aching limbs he had dropped on his couch when at last rest came, and tender face, bruised from six or seven hours' punching, that even the soft pillow seemed to hurt. But he trained on. In a few weeks it was tired to bed but unaching, unhurt — only deliciously weary with the wearyness of perfect muscles and nerves relaxed to delicious rest; early afoot, keen, and sound, and vigorous; brisk, ready smiling to jump into the ring for the last P. R. exhibition with old Japhra as for the first spar with Ginger Cronk or Snowball White. "Thou art the fighting type," wise

Japhra had told him years before; and those exhibition rounds with the old man were each of them lessons that brought him to rare skill with his fists.

While they sat together before their turn Japhra would instruct what was to be learnt this time, and while they sparred "Remember!" Japhra would call, "Remember! Good! Good! — Weak! Weak! — Follow it! Follow it! — Speed's thy game! — Quick as thou canst sling them! — See how that hook leaves thee unguarded! — Again! — All open to me again! — Again! — ah, take it, then!" and *clip!* to the unprotected stomach, savage as he could drive it, would come old Japhra's left; and Percival go gasping, and Ginger Cronk to the spectators: "With that terrible punch, gentlemen, Gipsy Japhra knocked out Boy Duggan and took the championship belt at Los Angeles. Put your hands together, gentlemen, and give 'em a 'earty clap." When the round was ended Japhra would go over it point by point. When they sat or walked together, at meals or on the road, he was forever imparting his advice, his knowledge, his experience. He was never tired of teaching . . . and Percival trained on.

II

There came a day when "Thou must go slow with me," Japhra said after they had finished their round. "I have put skill to thy youth and strength. Thou must go slow with me or the folks will see nothing of the parts I am to show them." There came a day when he was given demonstration — if he had cared to recognise it for such — that the van folk knew him for a clever one with his fists. Foxy Pinsent supplied it.

In all the crowd of tough characters that made up

Maddox's Royal Circus and Monster Menagerie with its attendant booths Foxy Pinsent alone gave him a supercilious lip or darkling scowl where others gave him smile and welcome. Foxy Pinsent had an old grudge against him — as Japhra had said — and lost no opportunity to rub it. The fact that "Japhra's Gentleman" was in the way of becoming a rival attraction to his own fame among the crowds that flocked to the fairs sharpened his spleen. The ever increasing bad blood between the two factions — Maddox's and Stingo's — gave him chance to exercise it.

Percival came hot to Japhra one day: "Damn that man Pinsent, Japhra. He's going too far with me. He's been putting it about the vans that I am too much the gentleman to go with a Maddox man — that I said in his hearing I refused to go with Dingo Spain to buy bread yesterday because I would not be seen in his company by decent people."

Japhra looked up at the angry face: "Let him bide. Let him bide."

"I'm not afraid of him."

"Nor I of adders, but I do not disturb their nests — nor lie in their ways."

On a day the reason came for Percival to cross the adder's way. Egbert Hunt knocked over a bucket in which one of Pinsent's negro pugilists was about to wash. The man used his fists, then his boots, on Hunt, sending him back brutally used. Percival sought out the black, outfought him completely, and administered a punishing that appeared to him to meet the case. Then came Pinsent.

"You've put your hands to one of my men, I hear — to Buck Osborn?"

"An infernal bully," said Percival.

"You've put your hands to one of my men!"

"And will again if he gives me cause!"

Foxy Pinsent came nearer, thin mouth and narrow eyes contracted in his ring expression. "Watch me, my gentleman; my lads' quarrels are mine. Watch out how you go your ways."

Percival glanced behind to see he had room: "You can leave that to me. I'll not have my friends knocked about."

"It's you in danger of the knocking about, my gentleman! That fine face of yours would take a bloody mark."

Percival slipped back his right foot six inches and glanced behind him again: "Try it, Pinsent."

Foxy Pinsent noticed the action. He moved his left fist upwards a trifle, then dropped it to his side and turned away with a laugh: "I don't fight boys; I thrash 'em."

"You know where to find me," Percival said.

III

So and in this wise he trained on to the tough, quick, good life; and in spirit developed as in body. The deeper he knew Japhra, the wider became his comprehension of life. He had failed once in the struggle with self, and that on the very night of Japhra's instruction of how that struggle should be fought: he was training on now not to fail again if ever the Big Fight should come. "What, art thou vexed again?" Japhra would say when sometimes he fell to brooding. "Get at the littleness of it — get at the littleness of it. It will pass. Remember what endureth. Not man nor man's work — only the green things that fade but come again Spring

by Spring; only the brown earth that to-day humbly supports thee, to-morrow obscurely covers thee; only the hills yonder that shoulder aside the wind; only the sea that changeth always but changeth never; only the wind on our cheeks here, that to-day suffers itself to go in harness to yonder mill and to-morrow will wreck it and encourage the grass where it stood. Lay hold on that when aught vexeth thee; all else passeth. . . ."

He trained on. Trifle by trifle and more and more he received and held, understood and stored for profit the little man's philosophy; trifle by trifle, more and more, developed qualities that made for the quality of self-restraint that ripened within him. Whatever his mood there was always peace and balm for him in the van. Many signs discovered to him that he was not merely an accepted part of Japhra's life and Ima's but a very active part; the little stir of welcome told him that — the little stir that always greeted him when he came on them sitting together.

They called him "Percival" now, at his desire. To Japhra he was still sometimes Little Master; to Ima never. But in Ima's ways and in her speech he noticed altogether a change in these days. The "Thou" and "Thee" and "Thine" of her former habit were gone: she never appeared now with naked feet, but always neatly hosed and shod. Gentle in her movements too, and seemly in her dress, Percival noticed, and he came to find her strange — a thing apart — in her rough surroundings; strange to them and remote from them when she sat plying her needle, attending to his hungry wants and Japhra's, or mothering some baby from a neighbour's van. He came to think her — contrasted thus with all the sights and sounds about her — the gentlest creature that could be; her voice wonderfully

soft, her touch most kind when she dressed a bruise or nursed him, as once when he lay two days sick. She mended his clothes; made some shirts for him; passed all his things through her hands before he might wear them; and never permitted him clothes soiled, or lacking buttons, or wanting the needle.

He was leaving the van once to go into the town against which they were pitched. She called him back. The scarf he wore was soiled, she said, and she came to him with a clean one.

He laughed at her: "It's absolutely good enough."

"No, soiled," she said, and took it from his neck and placed the other.

He playfully prevented her fingers. "I'm like a child with a strict nurse — the way you look after me."

She replied, smiling but serious: "It is not for you to get into rough ways."

"They're good enough for me."

She shook her head. "You are not always for such."

CHAPTER XII

LETTERS OF RECALL

I

THE first winter of this life Percival spent with Japhra in the van; the second took him, for the first time since he had broken away, back to "Post Offic." Ima left them, when the circus broke up in that first October, to go to her doctor friend in Norfolk, there to continue the education she had imposed upon herself. Egbert Hunt took her place, and the three started to tour the country till Spring and the reassembly of Maddox's should be round again. But winter on the road proved inclement to Mr. Hunt's nature. A week of frost in early December that had them three days snow-bound and on pinching short commons decided him for less arduous ways of life. He left them for London, his pockets well enough lined by his season's apprenticeship to old One Eye; they had news of him once as a socialist open air speaker in company with some organisation of malcontents of his kidney; once as prominent in an "unemployed" disturbance and in prison for seven days as the price of his activities.

"He will know gaol a longer term ere he has done," was Japhra's comment. "A weak, bad streak in him."

Percival laughed. "Poor old Hunt. More bitter than ever against 'tyrangs' now, Japhra. He's been shaping that way since I first knew him — often made me laugh with his outbursts."

"Best keep clear of that kind," Japhra said. "The stick for such."

They pushed North. Neither had a feeling for roofs or fireside that winter. The tinkering and the Punch and Judy kept them in enough funds scarcely to draw upon the season's profits. Japhra plied him at the one; Percival took chief hand in the other. A tough life, a quiet life, a good life. With only their two selves for company they talked much and read much of the three fighting books that were Japhra's library. Percival was almost sorry when Maddox's was picked up again and Ima rejoined them. He welcomed the second winter when it came; chance fell that it had him scarcely a month alone with Japhra when it saw him leave the van, and homeward bound to Burdon.

II

Two letters gave him this sudden impulse. Both were from "Post Offic" — one forwarded thence — and seemed to have partnered one another on a long and devious search before finding him. One was from Aunt Maggie. The other he opened first and opened with hands that trembled a little. Well he knew that regular, clear writing! He had only seen it in notes to Rollo, invitations to tea, in the days gone by, but it was as memorized to him as in him every memory of her was graven — Dora's!

His hands trembled that held this the first sign of her since he had left her in the drive at Abbey Royal on that night eighteen months before, and his breath ran quick. The first sign! He had urged her at their parting he might write to her. She had desired he should not. Letters at the French school might only come, it appeared, from parents, or in handwriting authorised by

parents, and only to such quarters might be addressed. He had accepted the fate. Nay, well it should be so, he had told her. He would not — could not, for he loved her so! — see her again, be the time never so long, till somehow he had won some place in the world; very well, not even write to her. Their hearts alone should bind them: "For, Dora, you are to be mine. Somehow I shall do it — not see you till I have. You will remember — that is all, remember."

How had she remembered? He broke the seal and held his breath to read.

She wrote from Burdon House in Mount Street: explaining the address as though he had not known Mrs. Espart had taken it on lease at the time of Lord Burdon's death: —

DEAR PERCIVAL,

We returned here yesterday from the South of France, where we have been with Rollo and Lady Burdon. Did you know that Mother has taken Rollo's house here until he wants it and turns us out? I am writing for Rollo. I think you will be distressed to learn that he has been very ill — beginning with pneumonia. But we left him better, and they are following us to London soon. He most urgently desired me to tell you this, and that you must come and see him then. He says that he must see you again; and, indeed, he is forever talking of you. As to that, I must tell you that when I was with him we saw in an illustrated paper some pictures entitled "Life among the Showmen;" and in one, on a tent was to be seen "Gentleman Percival." From what Rollo told us, that was your tent. He was very excited about it; and to me it was very singular to have come upon it like that.

Well, I have written his address on the back of this, and you must certainly write to him or he will think that I have not told you and that I side with Lady Burdon and Mother in estimating that you are "very wild," which I do not.

I address this to your home; but it is hard to know if it will ever reach you.

Yours sincerely,
DORA ESPART.

How had she remembered? No trace of any memory of love was in the lines he carried to his lips and read again and many times again. He reckoned nothing of that. He read what he had expected to find. He read herself, as in the months that separated that magic hour in the drive he had come again to think of her — as one as purely, rarely, chastely different from her sisters as driven snow upon the Downside from snow that thaws along the road; as one that he should never have dared terrify by his rough ardour into that swooning "Oh, Percival, what is it, this?" Realising that moment of his passion, he sometimes writhed in self-reproach to think how violently he must have distressed her: sometimes hoped she had forgotten it — else surely shame of how her delicacy had been ravished at his hands would make her shrink at meeting him again. So this letter that had no hint of memory of love rejoiced and moved him to his depths. Unchanged from his boyish adoration of her, it revealed her, and unchanged he would have her be. Its precise air, its selected words, its stilted phrases, spoke to him as with her very voice — "It was very singular to me;" "It is hard to know:" as icicles broken in the hand! Snow-White-and-Rose-Red — and frozen snow and frozen red!

He was ardent and atremble in the resolve that he must get to London on Rollo's return and make old Rollo the excuse to see her again — touch her, perhaps; speak to her, ah! — then, and not till then, bethought him of his second letter. From Aunt Maggie; and he drew it from his pocket with prick of shame at his neglect of it. He had from time to time written to Aunt Maggie. Her letters were less frequent; easier to write to "Post Offic" than for "Post Offic" to write to him, ever on the move.

Three closely-written sheets came from the envelope. They contained many paragraphs, each of a different date — Aunt Maggie waited, as she explained, until she could be sure of an address to which to post her letter. There was much gossip of a very intimately domestic nature, each piece of news beginning with "I think this will interest you, dear." Before he was through with the letter the recurrence of the phrase, speaking so much devotion, caused a moisture to come to his eyes. "I think this will interest you, dear" — and the matter was that Honor burnt a hole in a new saucepan yesterday. "I think this will interest you, dear" — and "fancy! fourteen letters were posted in the box to-day." "I think this will interest you, dear" — and would he believe it! "one of the ducks hatched out sixteen eggs yesterday."

The more trivial the fact, the more Percival found himself affected. He was touched with the profound pathos of Aunt Maggie's revelation of how he centered each smallest detail of her remote and lonely life; he was rendered instantly responsive to the appeal with which at the end of her letter she cried to him to come home to see her — if only for a night. "This will be the second Christmas that you have been away. The

days are, oh! so very, very long for me without my darling boy."

He told Japhra that he must go — not for long, and if for longer than he thought, at least the first of the new year would see him back. They were in Essex. Urgent with this sudden determination that had him, he took train for London on the next morning, and before midday was set down at Liverpool Street Station. Holiday mood seized him now that he had taken holiday. He counted again and again the sixty-five pounds that, to his amazed joy, — he, who till now had never earned a penny! — Japhra paid him for two seasons' wage and share. It seemed a fortune — forced up the holiday spirit as bellows at a forge; and on the way to Waterloo he ridded his burning pockets of a portion of it in clothes and swagger kit-bag for this his holiday, and in presents that brought parcels of many shapes and sizes into his cab — for Aunt Maggie, for Honor, for Mr. Amber, for Mr. Hannaford, for all to whom his heart bounded now that he was to see them again.

III

In these delights he missed his train. Two hours were on his hands before the next, and as he contemplated them a daring thought (so he considered it) came to him. He took a hansom cab and bade the man drive him to Mount Street, — through Mount Street and so back again. He would see where she lived!

"Drive slowly up here," he told the man when the cab turned into the street for which he watched. "Do you know Burdon House?"

It was pointed out ahead of him. "Set down there many a time. Lord Burdon's 'ouse it was. Another party's got it now."

Percival leant back, not to be seen — not daring to be seen! — and stared, his pulses drumming, as he was slowly carried past.

Might there have troubled him some vague, secret feeling of association between himself and that brown, massive front of Burdon House with its broad steps leading to the heavy double doors, with its tall, wrought-iron railings above the area, with its old torch extinguishers on either side the entrance, with its quiet, impassive air that large old houses have, as of guardians that know much and have seen much — brides come and coffins go, birth and death, gay nights and sad, glad hours and sorry — and look to know more and see more? Might he have felt, as he told Aunt Maggie he had felt at Burdon Old Manor, "thinking without thinking, as if some one else were thinking," as he passed those steps where one that he might have called Father often had gaily passed, where one he might have called Mother had gone wearily up and come fainting, dizzily down?

He felt, nor was disturbed, by none of those. He only gazed, gazed as he would pierce them, at all its solemn windows, riveted its every feature on his mind; but only because it was where she must have looked, because it sheltered her where she must be. It was a new setting against which he might envisage her; he only thought of it as that.

CHAPTER XIII

MR. AMBER DOES NOT RECOGNISE

I

It was in dreams that night that vague, secret influences of his sight of Burdon House came stealing about him — if such they were; he attributed them to the disturbance of an event that greeted him within a few hours of his gay arrival at "Post Offic."

He had announced his coming by telegram. He took Plowman's Ridge on leaving the train at Great Letham, old friend wind greeting him with most boisterous Ha! Ha! Ha! and as he came down the slope two figures broke from the little copse and came fluttering up the Downside towards him — one slight with running tears, and outstretched, eager arms; the other gaunt and grim, uncompromising of visage, but with eyes aglisten.

"Aunt Maggie! Aunt Maggie!"

"My boy! My Percival!"

Her boy's arms went about her: for a space neither moved after that first cry. He only held her — close, close to him; she only clung to him, her face to his, and felt his dear face stop her flowing tears.

He held her from him then at arm's length, the better to gaze at her; and she overcame her foolish tears and told him: "How you have grown! How handsome you have grown!"

And Honor grimly, with grimness spoilt by chokey

utterance: "Ah, handsome is as handsome don't make fine birds!"

"You've got it wrong, you frightful old goose!" cried Percival; and there was Honor's bony cheek to be kissed, her bony hug to take.

Then the disturbing even: —

Mr. Amber, Aunt Maggie told him, was dying. He had been told Percival was coming and had begged to see him. There had only been a brief interval of consciousness in the last twenty-four hours; Percival had better go at once.

II

Percival went immediately. The Old Manor had the deserted aspect he remembered when, as a little boy, he used to seek Mr. Amber in the library; and it was to the library he now was taken. Mr. Amber had been carried there. He knew he was to die. He had begged to die in the apartment he loved — among his books.

There Percival found him. He lay on a bed that had been placed in the centre of the room. He was asleep, breathing with a harsh, unnatural sound. A nurse sent over from Great Letham attended him, and Percival inquired of her: "I am Percival; has he been asking for me?"

She shook her head: "Since this morning only for Lord Burdon. Before that, frequently."

Percival went on one knee by the bedside. The mild old face that he had always known silvery and smiling seemed white as the pillow where it lay, pathetically lined and hollowed. On a sudden the eyes very slowly opened and looked full into Percival's bending above him. Percival experienced a shock of horror at what

followed. Burning intelligence flamed into the dim eyes; the blood rushed in a crimson cloud to the white face; the thin form struggled where it lay.

"My lord! my lord!" Mr. Amber whispered; and "lift me — lying down before my lord!"

"Mr. Amber! I am Percival! You remember me!"

The nurse raised him, and with practised hand the pillows also, so that he reclined against them. "It is your friend Percival. Lord Burdon will soon come, perhaps."

He gave her no attention. He smiled at Percival in something of his mild old way. "We are very weak, my lord," he said. "Very weak."

"Mr. Amber! I am Percival! You remember what friends we were. You will get strong, and we will have some more reading together — you remember?"

Mr. Amber still smiling, his eyes closed again. "On the ladders."

"Yes — yes. On the ladders. You remember now — Percival."

Mr. Amber's smile seemed to settle upon his face as though his lips were made so. "Hold my hand, my lord."

He began to slip down in the bed. The nurse eased his position. He seemed back to unconsciousness again, his breathing very laboured. Night had drawn about the room and was held dusky by the candles. There stole about Percival, as he knelt, atmosphere of the memories he had recalled in vain attempt to arouse Mr. Amber's recognition. Again dusk here, and he with mild, old Mr. Amber. Again shadows wreathing about the high ceiling, stealing from the corners. Again a soft thudding on the window-pane, as of some shadow seeking to enter — death? Again the strange feeling of "thinking without thinking as if some one else were

thinking" — and on that, worn out perhaps with his long day, perhaps carried by some other agency, he went into a dream-state in which vague, secret influences of his ride through Mount Street came upon him. He thought he was in Mount Street again and come to Burdon House, and that the door opened as he ascended the steps. He found the interior completely familiar to him, and for some reason was frightened and trembled to find it so. He went from familiar room to familiar room, afraid at their familiarity as though it was some wrong thing he was doing, and knew himself searching — searching — searching. What he searched he did not know. He just opened a door, and looked, and closed it and passed on. There were persons in some rooms — once Dora, once Rollo, once Lady Burdon. They stretched hands to him or spoke. He shook his head and told them "I am not looking for you," and closed the doors upon them. He climbed the completely familiar stairs and searched each floor. The fear that attended him suddenly increased. He had a sudden and most eerie feeling that some presence was come about him as he searched. He heard a voice cry: "My son! My son! We have waited for you. Oh, we have waited for you!" Fear changed to a flood of yearning emotion. He tried to cry, "It is you — you I am looking for!" He could not speak, and wrestled for speech; and wrestling, came back to consciousness of his surroundings. He was streaming with perspiration, he found. He saw next that Mr. Amber's eyes were open and looking at him, and heard him say, "Percival!"

Had that been the voice in that frightful dream?

"Mr. Amber! I knew you would know me!"

Recognition was in the eyes, but they were filming.

"Yes, he knows you," the nurse whispered.

Quite firmly, firmer than he had yet spoken: "Hold my hand — my lord," Mr. Amber said, and ended the words and ended life with a little throaty sound.

The nurse disengaged their hands. "But I am so glad he did just recognise you," she said kindly.

III

Old friend wind was in tremendous fettle that night. Percival battled along Plowman's Ridge on his way back and had battled twenty minutes when he cried aloud, venting his grief, and answering the nurse's words, "He didn't recognise me!"

And old friend wind paused to listen; came in tremendous gusts, Ha! Ha! Ha! and hurled the words aloft and tossed and rushed them high along the Ridge.

"Something was wrong with me in there," Percival exclaimed. "Did I speak sense to him? What was happening to me? Was I dreaming? What was it? — oh, damn this wind!"

Ha! Ha! Ha! thundered old friend wind, staggering him anew — Ha! Ha! Ha!

An absolutely irrepressible party, old friend wind.

CHAPTER XIV

DORA REMEMBERS

I

PERCIVAL was not the only one that in this period was disturbed by uneasy dreams, by vague and strange half-thoughts, by "thinking without thinking," as though some other influence were temporarily in possession of the senses. Lady Burdon was thus disturbed; Aunt Maggie, too. But of the three Aunt Maggie only knew the cause. If Lady Burdon, if Percival, had brought their unrest to her for explanation she might have explained it as she was able to explain her own — the "fluttering" that very often came to her in these days of Percival's visit home. She might have told them, as she told herself, that it was occasioned for that the years were closing in now — the prepared doom gathering about them all and they responsive to its nearness as gathering storm gives vague unease, headaches, depression when its emanations fall.

For her own part Aunt Maggie had herself in hand again — was again possessed by the certitude that nothing could go amiss with her plans. It had supported her through all these long years. It had been shaken, but had recovered again, by fear of Percival's affection for Rollo. It tore at her frantically, like a strong horse against the bridle, now that only a few months remained for its release in her revenge's execution. In little less than a year Percival would be twenty-one. She no more minded — relative to her plans — the proof of

the fondness still between him and Rollo shown in his leaving her to stay with Rollo in town, than she minded — relative to the same purpose — his determination to be with Japhra again when winter ended. She suffered distress both at the one and the other in that they robbed her of the object of her heart's devotion; she felt no qualm that either would hinder her revenge. "Strange-like?" "Touched-like?" The villagers, when she passed them without seeing them in these days, were more than ever sure of that, poor thing; but she was more than ever sure — lived in the past and in the near, near future and had scenes to watch there.

II

Rollo's return to town was delayed longer than Dora had supposed in her letter to Percival. It was not till February that his doctors and his mother gave way to his protestations that he would never get fit if he could not go and have a glimpse of old Percival while he had the chance, and then it was only for a week — a passage through town to get some things done and to pick up the Esparts for a spring sojourn in Italy.

Thus Percival was several weeks with Aunt Maggie before he left her for Rollo — and Dora. Pleasant weeks he found them, reclaiming all the old friends (save that one whose grave only was now to be visited) and in their company, and in the new affection that they gave him for his strong young manhood, retasting again the happy, happy time of earlier days. There were jolly teas with the Purdies, brother and sister; plump Mr. Purdie never tired of saying, with quite the most absurd of his shrill, ridiculous chuckles, "Why, you've grown into a regular man and I expected to see

a swarthy gipsy with earrings and a red neckcloth!" birdlike little Miss Purdie, more birdlike than ever with her little hops and nods and her "Now *fancy* you coming to take me to the Great Letham Church Bazaar! I was *wanting* to go. But you're *not* to be extravagant, Percival. At Christmas you were *dreadful*. You *don't* know the value of money!" And there were almost daily visits to Mr. Hannaford, Stingo with him now till the road was to be taken again, who found Percival a proper full-size marvel now, and blessed his eighteen stun proper if he didn't, whose little 'orse farm was developing amazingly, who displayed it and who discussed it with Percival to the tune of leg-and-cane cracks of almost incredible volume, and who placed at Percival's entire disposal a little riding 'orse, three parts blood and one part fire, that showed him to possess a seat and hands that any little 'orse oughter be proud to carry, "bless my eighteen stun proper if he didn't!" (Crack!)

And there were thoughts of Dora . . . who soon must be met and whom to meet he burned (his darling!) and feared (his darling and his goddess! — too rare, too exquisite for him, as tracery of frost upon the window-pane that touch or breath will break or tarnish!). Thus he thought of her; thus to help his thoughts often walked over to closed Abbey Royal; thus never could approach the gates without the thought that if, by some miracle, he met her there he could not dare approach her. He would steal away at her approach, he knew. Watch her if, unseen, he might unseen adore her — mark her perfect beauty, breathless see her breathe; watch her poised to listen to some bird that hymned her coming; watch her stoop to greet some flower's fragrance with her own. Watch the happy grasses take her feet and watch those others, benisoned and scented by the bor-

der of her gown; watch the tumbling breezes give her path and only kiss her — see them race along the leaves to give her minstrelsy. Speak to her? — how should he dare?

III

What his condition then when at last in London he came face to face with her? Rollo and Lady Burdon stayed their week at a private hotel — Baxter's in Albemarle Street. He was immediately made their guest (against Lady Burdon's wish, who desired now in the approach of the consummation of her own plans — and Mrs. Espart's — to detach the friendship she had formerly encouraged; but he did not know that). Rollo met him at Waterloo station and took him direct to the hotel. Eager to meet old Rollo again he was touched by the pathetic devotion of Rollo's greeting, touched also at the frail and delicate figure that he presented. The emotions were violently usurped by others when Baxter's was reached and he was taken to the private sitting-room Lady Burdon had engaged.

"Here's mother!" Rollo cried, opening the door.

Here also were Mrs. Espart and Dora.

The elder ladies were seated. Percival greeted them and fancied their manner not very warm. He had a swift recollection of the letter's advice that they joined in estimating him "Very wild"; but while he shook hands, while he exchanged the conventional civilities, his mind, nothing concerned with them, was actively discussing how he should comport himself, what he should see, when he turned to the figure that had stood by the window, facing away from him, when he entered.

"Never in London before — no," he said. "I have passed through once, that is all."

Then he turned.

She had come down the room and was within two paces of him. Her dress was of some dark colour and she wore fine sables, thrown back so that they lay upon her shoulders and came across her arms. A large black hat faintly shadowed the upper part of her face; her left hand was in a muff, and when he turned towards her she had the muff nestled against her throat. She gave the appearance of having watched him while he spoke, reckoning what he was, with her face resting meditatively upon her muff, her tall and slim young figure upright upon her feet.

There was no perceptible pause between his turning to her and their speaking. Yet he had time for a long, long thought of her before he opened his lips. It took his breath. So still she stood, so serene and contemplative her look, that he thought of her, standing there, as some most rich and most rare picture, framed by the soft dusk that London rooms have, and surely framed and set apart from mortal things.

She dropped her muff to her arm's length with a sudden action, just as a portrait might stir to come to life. She raised her head so that the shadow went from her face and revealed her eyes, as a jealous leaf's shade might be stirred to reveal the dark and dew-crowned pansy. She had not removed her gloves and she gave him her small hand — that last he had held cold, trembling and uncovered — gloved in white kid. She spoke and her voice — that last he had heard aswoon — had the high, cold note he thrilled to hear.

"It is pleasant to see you again," she said.

He never could recall in what words he replied — nor if indeed he effected reply.

Conventional words went between them before she

and her mother took their departure; conventional words again at a chance meeting on the following day and again when the parties met by arrangement at a matinee. His week drew to a close. As its end neared he began to resist the mute and distant adoration which he had felt must be his part when he had thought of meeting her again and which, without pang, he at first accepted as his part now that they were come together. But when the very hours could be counted that would see her gone from him again he felt that attitude could no longer be endured. Insupportable to pass into the future without a closer sign of her! — insupportable even though the sign proved one that should reward his temerity by sealing her forever from his lips. He nerved himself to the daring — the very opportunity was hard to seek. Rollo, in the slightly selfish habit that belongs to delicate persons accustomed, as he was accustomed, to their own way, was ever desirous of having Percival to himself alone. He saw plenty of Dora at other times, he said (deliberately avoiding a chance of meeting her on one occasion); and when Percival, not daring to do more, made scruples on grounds of mere politeness, "But, bless you, she'll think nothing of it," Rollo said carelessly: "She's made of ice — Dora. I like her all right, you know. But she's not keen on anything. She's got no more feeling than — well, ice," and he laughed and dismissed the subject.

Had she not? It was Percival's to challenge it.

The chance came on the eve of the morrow that was to see his friend's departure for Italy and his own for a farewell to Aunt Maggie and so back to Japhra again. The Esparts came over to dinner at Baxter's hotel — came in response to Lady Burdon's private and urgent request of Mrs. Espart. The week of Percival's visit

had tried her sorely. Night by night and every night, as she told Mrs. Espart, she had had that dreadful nightmare of hers again — that girl to whom she cried "I am Lady Burdon," and who answered her: "Oh, how can you be Lady Burdon?;" to whom she cried "I hold," and who answered her, "No, you do not — Nay, I hold."

Aunt Maggie might have explained it. Mrs. Espart laughed outright. "That? Good gracious, I thought you had forgotten that long ago."

"So I had — so I had. I never thought of it again from the day I told you until last Wednesday night — the day Percival came to us. Since then every night . . ."

She paused before the last words and stopped abruptly after them.

"Well, my dear! You're not putting down to poor Percival what must be the fault of Mr. Baxter's menus, surely?"

Lady Burdon said without conviction: "No — no, I'm not. Still, it began then — and I don't like him now — don't care for Rollo to be so attached to him now — and had words with Rollo about it — and perhaps that was the reason and is the reason. Anyway, do come to dinner to-night — distract my thoughts perhaps — I can't face that nightmare again. It's on my nerves."

Mrs. Espart permitted herself the tiniest yawn, but promised to come; and came, bringing Dora.

IV

So Percival's chance came, or so came, rather, his last opportunity — for he ran it to the final moment.

Announcement of the Esparts' carriage brought their evening to an end, and he went down with Rollo to see them off. Baxter's preserved its exclusiveness by preserving its old fashions; the staircase was narrow, so the hall. Mrs. Espart went first, then Rollo. Percival followed Dora.

As she came to the pavement she turned to gather her skirts about her. In the action she looked full at him.

The end?

He said: "Dora — do you ever remember?"

Her skirts seemed to have eluded her fingers and she must make another hold at them. He saw the colour flame where her fair face showed it, swiftly, deeply scarlet in that shade on either cheek. He saw her young breast rise as though that red flood drew and held it — saw her lips part for words, and held his breath to catch her voice.

"I have not forgotten," she whispered.



BOOK FIVE

BOOK OF FIGHTS AND OF THE BIG FIGHT. THE ELEMENT OF COURAGE



BOOK FIVE

BOOK OF FIGHTS AND OF THE BIG FIGHT. THE ELEMENT OF COURAGE

CHAPTER I

BOSS MADDOX SHOWS HIS HAND

I

IMA asked: "Of what are you thinking, Percival?"

"Of when I shall leave you all — and how."

She replied: "Strange, then, how thoughts run. It was in my mind also."

Stranger how tricks and chances of life go! This trick and that — and this was to be his last night with the van folk. That chance and this — and within a few hours he was to be returned to Aunt Maggie, bade good-by at the close of his visit scarcely four months since. This trick and that, that chance and this, and he was to be put in the way of winning Dora — a way that never had seemed so obscure, never so impossible of attainment as when he came back to Japhra with her "I have not forgotten," at once shouting to him that she loved him and mocking him with the difference between her estate and his.

Already the tricks and chances were afoot. He was alone with Ima upon a rising bluff of common land. Considerably below them, so that they looked down as it were from a cliff to a valley, the fair was pitched and

in full swing — that it was in full swing and he idle was the first step in the freakish hazards that were to encompass him this night.

II

A stifling evening had succeeded a burning day. Here on the bluff a breeze moved cool and soft as it had been waftings from the dusky cloak night dropped about them; below was heat and crowded life and clamour, rising in the waving reek of the naphtha flares; in shouts of the showmen; in shrill laughter from village girls at fun about the booths, or horseplay with their swains; in ceaseless rifle-cracks from the shooting-galleries — in drum-thumpings, in steam organs, in brazen instruments; occasionally, high above it all, in enormous *oo-oo-oomphs* from the caged lions in the huge marquee that housed Boss Maddox's Royal Circus and Monster Forest-bred Menagerie — a tremendous sound, as Percival thought when it came booming across the clamour, that was a brute's but that seemed, like some trump of protest against the din, to make brutish the human cries and shouts it governed.

Two crowds, leaving and entering, jostled one another at the entrance to the Royal Circus and Forest-bred Menagerie; stretching on either hand from where they pressed ran the minor shows under Boss Maddox's proprietorship, forming a noisy, flaring street that ended, facing the circus marquee, with "Foxy" Pinsent's Academy of Boxing and School of Arms. Maddox's Royal Circus and Forest Bred Menagerie at one end, Pinsent's fine booth at the other — between them Maddox's Living Pictures, Maddox's Wild-West Shooting Gallery, Maddox's Steam Switch-back and Aerial Railway, Maddox's Original Marionettes, Maddox's Premier

Boatswings, Maddox's Monster Panorama, Maddox's Royal Theatre and Concert Divan, Maddox's Elite Refreshment Saloons, Maddox's American Freak Museum, and all Maddox's smaller fry — coker-nut shies, hoop-las, Living Mermaid, Hall of Strength, Cave of Mystery, Magic Mirrors, and the rest of them; owned by Boss Maddox, financed by Boss Maddox, or, if of independent ownership, having the Boss's favour and acknowledging the Boss's ownership.

No booths whose proprietors called Stingo Boss were open: and that was one step in the tricks and chances of the day.

The gaunt figure of Boss Maddox, watchful and urgent this night for the very reason that the Stingo booths were closed, passed now along the further side of lights towards Foxy Pinsent's pitch. Head bent towards his left shoulder; hands clasped behind his back; uncommonly tall; uncommonly spare — that was Boss Maddox anywhere.

A further mark, as he moved through his little kingdom, proclaimed him who he was and what he was. Frequent nods of his head he made in response to hat touchings or greetings in the crowd; frequent stoppings to exchange a few words with some figure that stepped into his path — and broke away from others or pushed others aside to step there: the local tradesmen these, or members of the local Borough Council, anxious to be in with Boss Maddox and so to secure the considerable patronage in victualling and provender he was able to distribute; or anxious to let fellow-townsmen observe on what familiar terms they were with the Boss, and concerned to know that he found his pitch to his liking. A mighty man, the Boss in these days, who bought up his pitches and paid handsomely for them a year in ad-

vance, who on a famous occasion had fallen into dispute with a Borough Council, refused their district the honour of his shows, and thereby — by loss of entertainment and loss of revenue — had caused the Borough Councillors to suffer defeat at the next election. Things like that were remembered up and down the west of England; Boss Maddox in the result was reckoned a man to be placated, to be done homage, and to have his interests preserved. Only the old Stingo gang resisted him, and this day he had paid them dear for their want of allegiance.

His parade brought him at length to "Foxy" Pinsent's Academy of Boxing and School of Arms. Foxy Pinsent had risen to be his lieutenant and right-hand man in the management of his business, and Boss Maddox was come to compare notes on how the Stingo crowd were taking their set-back.

Eight pugilists in flannels — two of them negroes — displayed themselves upon the raised platform outside the Academy of Boxing and School of Arms. Pinsent, in a long fawn coat reaching to his shoes, paced before them, crying to the assembled crowds their merits, their prowess, their achievements and their challenges. He swung a great bundle of boxing gloves in his right hand and, amid delighted shouts of the spectators, sent a pair flying to venturesome yokels here and there who pointed to one or other of the eight stalwarts in acceptance of combat.

As Boss Maddox pushed his way to the front the eight turned and filed into the booth. He raised a hand. Foxy Pinsent tossed a last pair of gloves to the crowd, came down the steps from the platform and joined him.

"How are they taking it, Boss?"

"Pretty tough. Move round with me and let 'em

see we're watching. In a while I'm to have a word with Stingo and Japhra — you with me, boy."

Foxy Pinsent spat on the ground. "We've fixed the ——s this time," he said venomously.

III

The fixing of the Stingo crowd had been Boss Maddox's culminating stroke in the heavy hand he had pressed these many seasons upon those who named Stingo Boss. The bad blood between the two factions of which Japhra had told Percival years before had steadily increased with Boss Maddox's increasing dominance and position. Waxing more and more determined to crush under his rule the little knot of Stingo followers — or to crush them out — Boss Maddox had this day given them an extra twist — and they had made protest by refusing to erect their booths.

A new Fair ground had been marked out here since the last visit of the showmen. A broad stream marked one boundary, bridged only by the highroad bridge a mile up from the new ground. The new ground was small. Maddox's would require it all, the Boss announced. Beyond the stream was common land, free to all. "Yonder, you!" said Boss Maddox to the Stingo crowd. "Yonder, you!" and pointed across the stream with his stick.

It meant going back a mile and a mile down again so as to come to the common land. It meant worse than that, with a discovery that changed the first demur to loud and bitter protest: "No bridge except the highroad bridge? Then how were folk going to get over from the Fair Ground? No bridge? What game's this, Boss?"

"Your game," Boss Maddox told them in his stern and callous way. "Naught to do with me that the Fair Ground's changed. Your game. Get out and play it."

The angry crowd went to Stingo and Stingo to Boss Maddox. Boss Maddox could not refuse parley with Stingo, and gave it where the great pole of his circus marquee was being fixed — his own followers grouped about, enjoying the fun; Stingo's packed in a murmuring throng behind Stingo's broad back.

The interview was very short. "You're going too far, Boss Maddox," Stingo said in his husky whisper. "This ain't fair to the boys. Grant you the ground's too small. After your tent and Pinsent's there the rest should fall by lot. That's fair to all. It was done on the road Boss Parnell's time when you and me were boys."

"It's not done in mine," said Boss Maddox, and his words called up two murmurs — approval and mocking behind him, wrath before.

Stingo waited while it died away, then went close with words for Boss Maddox's private ear. "You've been out to make bad blood these three summers, Maddox," he said. "Have a care of it. I'll not be answerable for my boys here."

His tone was of grave warning, as between men of responsible position. But it was Foxy Pinsent, standing with Maddox, who replied to him. "We'll drink all we may brew," Foxy Pinsent said, and sneered: "We're not fat old women this side, Stingo."

The flag of a temper kept in control but now burst from his command came in violent purple into old Stingo's face. His huskiness went to its most husky pitch, "By God, Foxy! I'll stuff it into ye, if need be," he throated.

He took a calmer and wiser mood back to his followers,

joining with Japhra in counselling a making the best of it across the stream to-night and a deputation to Boss Maddox, when heads on both sides were cooler, on the morrow. They would not listen to him. They would stay where they were, they told him. They could not open their booths here — they would not open them there; here, to assert their rights, they would stay. What was Boss Maddox's game? — to rid himself of them altogether? — they who had worked the West Country boy and man, girl and woman, in this company before Boss Maddox was heard of? Were they going to be turned adrift from it — from the roads they knew and the company they knew? Not they! — not if Boss Maddox and his crowd came at 'em with sticks! Let 'em come! Ah, let Boss Muddy Maddox and his crowd try 'em a bit further and the sticks would come out in their own hands as they came in their fathers' in the big fight that sent the Telfer crowd north in '30. . . .

IV

So the Stingo vans remained where they had been driven up on the edge of the Fair ground. The men for the most part shared their afternoon meal in groups that sullenly discussed their hurt. Some broodingly watched the erection of their rivals' booths. A few gathered about Egbert Hunt, who had oratory to deliver on this act of oppression. The winters Hunt had spent with "unemployed" malcontents had given a flow of language to a character that from boyhood had shaped away from honest work and towards hostility against authority. In the vans, among men who sweated as they toiled, and worked in the main for their own hands, he was commonly an object of contempt. To-day he found

audience. He had words and ranted his best — "Tyrang!" the burden of it; rising, as he tossed his arms and worked himself up, to "'Boss' Maddox is he? 'Oo appointed 'im boss over you or over me? 'Boss' Maddox? Tyrang Maddox — that's what I name 'im."

He observed a titter run round those who listened to him; turned to seek its cause; with Tyrang Maddox found himself face to face; and before he could make movement of escape was sent to the ground with a stunning box on the ear. He shouted a stream of filthy abuse and made to spring to his feet. Boss Maddox's hand pinned him down and Boss Maddox's whip came about his writhing form in a rain of blows that, when they were done and he had taken the kick that concluded them, left him cowering.

"Whose hand are you, you whelp?" Boss Maddox demanded.

Egbert Hunt looked up at him. He was gasping with sobs of pain and sobs of rage. He looked up, hate and murder in his eye, and pressed his lips between his sobs.

The whip went up. "Whose hand?"

Egbert cowered back: "Old One-Eye's."

"Keep to his heel. Cross my sight again and the same is waiting for you."

Boss Maddox stalked away. A crowd had gathered from all parts of the camp, attracted by Egbert's screams. Egbert raised himself on one arm and looked at the grinning faces before him. He got stiffly to his feet, mumbling to himself, his breast still heaving with sobs. "Me, a full-grown man, to be used like a dog! Cross his path! — ill day for him when I do!"

He went a few paces, walking parallel to those assem-

bled. Suddenly he turned to them, tears running down his face, and threw up his clenched hands. "I'll put a knife in 'im!" he cried. "By God, I'll put a knife in 'im!"

The crowd laughed.

CHAPTER II

IMA SHOWS HER HEART

I

PERCIVAL suggested to Ima that they should use in a stroll the leisure evening that the trouble in the vans had given him. Some drink had been passing as the day wore on, and the heat between the two factions was not better for it. Here and there bickerings were assuming an ugly note. — "Let's get out of it," Percival said. "Come along, Ima, up to the top over there — Bracken Down they call it."

It was close upon nine o'clock as they left the Fair. They picked their way along the paths through the tall bracken that gave the place its name — reaching a clearing in the thick growth, by mutual accord they dropped down for a glad rest.

Very still and cool here among the fern, the Fair a nest of tossing lights, faint cries and that lion's trump of *oo-oo-oomph* beneath them; a remote place of silence, and silence communicated itself to them until Ima broke it by her question "Of what are you thinking, Percival?" and to his reply — that he thought of when he should leave them all, and how — told him "Strange then how thoughts run. It was in my mind also."

Stranger how tricks and chances of life go! Looking back afterwards, recalling her words, Percival realised how events had run from one to another upon the

most brittle thread of hazards. The trouble in the vans had sent him out here with Ima; that was the merest chance; that was the beginning of the thread.

Very cool and remote here among the bracken. He had gone back to silence after her last words. It was she who spoke again.

"Are you weary of it?" she asked.

He was lying at his full length, face downwards, his chin upon his clasped fingers. She sat upright beside him, one knee raised and her hands about it.

He turned his cheek to where his chin had been and looked up lazily at her: "Why, no, not weary of it, Ima. I like the life. I've been at it a long time. When the day comes I shall be sorry to go."

She was looking straight before her. "A sorry day for us, also," she said.

"Will you be sorry, Ima?"

"Of course I shall be sorry."

He gave a sound of mischievous laughter. Lying idly stretched out there, the warm night and the unusual sense of laziness he was enjoying stirred in him some prankish spirit, or some spirit of more warm desire, that he had never felt in Ima's company. "Yet you are always trying to get rid of me," he said; and he laughed again on that mischievous note, and snuggled his cheek closer against his hands, and felt that spirit run amicably through him as he stretched and then released his muscles.

She looked down at him, smiling. "Unkind to return my conduct so," she said. "No, I have but reminded you you are not always for the rough ways."

He had watched her face as he lay there, seen how her hair, her brow, her eyes, alone in all the shadow about Bracken Down caught the light from where the light was

starred across the sky, and how her lips seemed also to attract it. Now when she looked down and smiled, it was as if some gentle radiance were bent upon him, or as if Night, in visible embodiment, gracious as Summer night, starred, tranquil, cool, stooped to his couch.

He got quickly to his feet, that spirit tingling now.

"Going?" she asked, and the lamp of her face was turned up to him so that he looked full into it.

"No," he said, pronouncing the word as he had made his laugh — as if some inward excitement pressed its escape.

"No." He came in front of her, went on his knees and sat back on his heels. That brought him close to her, facing her.

"Ima," he said, "you've got six — seven stars on your face, do you know that?"

She smiled, unaware of his mood.

Himself he was scarcely aware of it: "Well, you have, though," he said. He approached a finger towards her and pointed, and almost touched her while he spoke. "You have, though. Two on your hair — there and there. One on your forehead — there. One in each eye — that's five. Two on your mouth — one here, one there: seven stars!"

"Foolish talk," she smiled. "We had a Romany woman once with us who told fortunes. Just so have I heard her speak to village girls. When —"

His eyes betrayed him. Concern and worse leapt into hers. She thrust out a hand to stop him, but he bent forward swiftly and strongly. Urged by the spirit that laziness and the warm, still night had put into him, that had led him on in mischief and that now suddenly engulfed him — "Stars on your mouth!" he cried, and caught his arms about her to kiss her.

II

He felt her twist as she were made of vibrant steel and strong as steel. His lips missed hers, and scarcely brushed her face. He tried for her lips again, laughing while he tried, and pressed her to him and felt her twist and strain away with a strength that surprised him while he laughed.

"Only a kiss, Ima! Only a kiss!"

She was of steel, but he held her. She spoke, and the strangeness of her words made him release her. "Ah, ah, Percival!" she gasped. "How you despise me!"

He let her go and she sprang away and upright, as a bow stick released. He let her go, and stared at her where she stood panting fiercely, and stared in more surprise when, checking her sobbing breaths, she spoke again.

In their struggle her hair had loosened and it fell, half-bound, in a heavy cascade upon one shoulder and down her breast. The starlight gleamed on it and on her dark face framed against it. She had a wild look, as if her mild beauty had suddenly gone gipsy; her sobbing voice had a wild tone, and he noticed the drop back to the "thee" long absent from her speech: "Ah, this to happen!" she cried. "This! Ah, what a thing I must be to thee!"

The strangeness and the violence of her distress astonished him. What had he done? Tried for a kiss? In the name of all the kisses snatched from pretty girls — ! "Why, Ima?" was all he could say. "Ima?"

She dropped to the ground with a collapsed action as though, oppressed as she was, standing were insupportable. She covered her face with her hands, ceased her sobbing breaths; but he saw her trembling in all her frame.

Rising, he went to her, put a hand on her shoulder,

and, at the convulsive movements he felt, made deeper the contrition for his careless act that her distress now caused him. "Ima, what have I done? Only tried to kiss you in fun. A sudden, silly thing — I don't know why — I never meant it — but only a kiss in fun."

He waited a moment, grieved for her, half-vexed with her — then had his answer and was faced with emotions as sudden and unexpected as when a moment before, without premeditation, he had her struggling in his arms.

She drew a deep breath and answered him. "That is it — in fun!" she said. She threw out her arms across her raised knees — the palms upward, the fingers curved in a most desolate action. "In fun!" she said intensely. "I would to God — I would to God thou hadst done it in passion."

He came in front of her. "Tell me what it is I have done to you," he said firmly.

The intensity went from her voice. She spoke then and thenceforward very softly, as if she were making explanation to a child, and in her answer she used again the term that went with the days of the "thee" and "thou" now returned to her.

"Used me," she answered him softly, "used me as any wanton is to be used, little master."

He cried, "Ima! After all these years we have known each other — a kiss in fun!"

But she went on: "What maids are kissed in fun? That a man weds does he use so? That the sisters of such as thou art does he so use? That give him cause for regard does he so use? What maids, then?" and answered herself, "Such as I am!"

"Oh!" he cried, wounded with pity for her, "Oh, Ima — Ima, dear, don't talk like that. What can you mean? I am sorry — sorry! Forgive me!"

Her sad eyes almost smiled at him. "I have nothing to forgive thee," she said. "It was but a foolish fancy that I had. Well that it should be broken — ended that;" and she looked again across the dark bracken, her arms extended upon her knees in that desolate pose.

It wrung him with pity — his dear Ima! "But tell me!" he pressed her, anxious to soothe her. "Tell me what you mean by fancy — by saying 'ended that!'"

She answered: "That all I had tried should be broken suddenly — suddenly as a star falls. I had not minded if I had been warned."

"What have you tried, Ima? — I want to know — to show you how sorry I am."

She was silent for a considerable space. When she began to speak she spoke without pause, without modulations of her low tone, without notice of the stammered exclamations that her words broke from him.

"Hear me, then," she said. "The thing is no more mine — thou mayst know it. To what shall I go back for when I first knew that I loved thee? —"

"*Ima!*"

"Why, from the first I knew it and began to try to fit me for thee. Why went I to shut myself in roofs and walls, to learn hard books and gentle ways and how to speak in thy fashion? — so thou shouldst not scorn me, so I might make me to be seemly in thy sight —"

"*Ima! I never dreamt — !*"

"— Why have I gone my ways so — winter by winter leaving my father's van? Because I loved thee since I first saw thee —"

"Don't! Don't!" he cried. There was something completely terrible to him in this avowal from a woman — immodest, shameful, horrible — that must cause her violation of her most sacred feelings as they would be

violated were she thrust naked before him; that caused him agony for her suffering, and agony that he should see it, as he would endure agony for her and for himself if made to see her nudity. "Don't, Ima! Don't! I understand — I see everything now. I ought to have known!"

But she went on — it might have been some requiem she made to some poor treasured thing now dead in her extended arms. She went on: "Because I loved thee — ah, worshipped all thy doings, all thy looks — loved thee with all the love that men and women love — as mothers love, as lovers love, as friends love, as brothers love, — there is no love but I have loved thee with it, and I have thought them all and loved thee with each one the better to enjoy my love —"

"*Ima!*"

"— Why cried I 'this to happen!' Because by thy kiss I saw that I was nothing to thee — and less than nothing. All my poor trying suddenly proved of no avail. All my poor fancy that haply thou mightst turn to me if I could be worthy of thee suddenly gone to dust that the winds sport. Why cried I 'ended that!' — "

She sighed very deeply. Her trembling had in some degree communicated itself to him. He trembled for the shame he knew she must be suffering, and for the effect upon him that her gentle, even voice had, crooning its tragedy in the darkness of their remote and silent situation, and for the effect upon him of that long sigh — rising and then falling away to tiniest sound, as it had been the passing of some spirit released to glide away across the bracken.

"— Why cried I 'ended that'? " and then her long, sad sigh; and then: "Because all is nought, little mas-

ter;" and he saw her fingers extend and her head bow a little. . . .

She arose then, slowly, and he went back to give her room. Her hair had slipped the last coil that held it, and was in a black sheen to her waist before one shoulder and in a black sheen to her waist behind her back. She began to loop it up with deft but tired fingers and looked at him while she twined it. Her face was very kind to him; the stars caught it, and he saw those stars upon her mild mouth that had tricked him to his wanton act: they seemed to show her almost smiling at him.

He asked: "Are we going now?"

She smiled then, gently. "Nay," she said. "I have left my poor secrets here — suffer me to go alone." Then turned and left him; and he watched her form swiftly merging to the darkness — now high among the bracken, now lower and lower yet, as though it were a deepening pool she entered. Now gone.

III

It seemed to Percival, left alone, as if some horrible and most oppressive trouble had befallen him. This piteous thing had struck so suddenly that for some moments he remained only numbed by it, as numbness precedes the onset of pain from a blow. When the full meaning returned to him, "Good God!" he cried aloud, "What a thing to have happened!" and most tenderly — with increasing tenderness, with increasing grief — he went through all she had revealed and how she had revealed it. It was surely the most monstrous pitiful thing that ever could be, her secret plots and strivings to fit herself for what she yearned — tasking herself in "gentle ways," in speech of his fashion, in hard books, in

the life between walls and under roofs; he ached for her in every bone as he thought of her thus schooling herself — for him. "Oh, horrible, horrible!" he muttered, writhing for her to remember all her little cares for him — her attention to his clothes, her concern that he should not get into "rough ways"; horrible! horrible! now that he knew their loving purpose. And then her revelation of it! He must rise and pace, the better to endure the recollection of that. How terribly she struggled in his arms! "God, what a beast a man can be!" he cried. What agony must have wrung that cry, "Ah, Percival, how you must despise me!" What agony that "This to happen!" What pain, what bleeding of her heart, that lamentable ending — "Because all is naught, little master!" Happy, happy time when first she used to call him by that quaint endearment; in what travail, in what blackness, it had come from her now! What had she done? Why fastened such a love upon him whose love was utterly pledged away? Nay, the torment was What had he done? What vile and brutal ends had he used to knock her to her senses? What manner of sympathy had he given her when she lay bleeding?

"I must go to her," he said abruptly; and at the best speed the darkness would admit he twisted his way through the paths among the bracken towards the distant nest of lights.

CHAPTER III

PERCIVAL SHOWS HIS FISTS

I

He ran in two moods. First he was earnest above all things to hold her hands and comfort her — to explain, to soothe, to endear. To hold her hands and tell her how fond, how very, very fond he was of her, of how they should be sister and brother, and the happiest and fondest sister and brother that ever were. To thank her, thank her for all her sweet, devoted ways. To tell her how good she was, how he admired her. That was one mood. The other was a savage and burning anger at himself, partly for his wanton act towards her, partly born of his agony of discomfort at the revelation she had made. The moods were intermingled. He yearned to comfort her for her suffering, he writhed to think he had witnessed that suffering. He was in the one part utter tenderness towards her — in the other flame, furious flame, most eager for vent.

The tricks and chances of life had fuel for the flame, not outlet for the tenderness, as he came to the nest of lights.

He went quickly to Japhra's van. It was end-on to him as he approached; and as he came to the shafts he saw a group of men there talking, — Japhra, Stingo, Boss Maddox. He supposed — and was confirmed by the words he caught as he passed them — that they were discussing the dispute. "I'll ask Pinsent," he heard

Boss Maddox say, and saw and heard him turn and call "Pinsent! Here, Foxy, where are you?" as though Foxy Pinsent had been of the group a moment before.

He passed quickly to the tail of the van and himself found Pinsent. "Angry, my pretty duck?" Foxy Pinsent was saying. "Angry? Chuck! chuck!"

It was to Ima that he was saying it; and with his last words, lolling against the entrance steps, he put out a hand to chuck her chin. She stepped out of his reach, and in relief cried, "Ah, Percival!" as Percival approached.

Flame, furious flame most eager for vent!

Choked for words by the flame's fierce leap and burn, "Clear out of this!" Percival said.

Foxy Pinsent turned his head slowly from Ima to Percival and looked Percival coolly up and down with the foxy smile. He put his elbows back to lean against the van, and very deliberately crossed one foot over the other. "Go to hell, won't you?" he said mildly.

It was a double smart he took to wipe the studied insolence from his face and to plant venom there. Percival's open hand that struck his mouth — a tough, vicious jolt with the arm half-crooked, a boxer's hit — drove his head against the van; and his "Ah, curse you!" followed the sharp smack and thud quick as if the three sounds — clip, thud, hiss — belonged to some instrument discharged.

He sprang forward, head back, hitting quickly with both hands, like the rare boxer he was — feinted with his right, drove his left against Percival's forehead, took a sharp *one-two!* on mouth and throat, and they were engaged, fighting close, fighting hard, and savage and glad, and fierce and exultant, each of them, at last to spring their common hate.

In its suddenness and fury, in its briefness and the manner of its check, the thing was like the sudden *woof!* of flame of a spark to a handful of gunpowder. There is the belch and blinding flash of heat, then the thick cloud of smoke. There was the swift drum of blows, then the rush of feet — Stingo, Japhra, Boss Maddox, men from here, men from there, in that trap-door swiftness with which commotion throws up a crowd — and the two were grasped and pulled apart and held apart, struggling like terriers that have had the first taste of blood and to collect the glut are gone blind to blows or authority.

Stingo from behind threw his two immense arms about Percival and leant with all his weight the better to lock them. Boss Maddox thrust his tall form before Pinsent, and snatched a wrist and gripped it in his long fingers. Japhra was at Percival's hands that tore at Stingo's.

"Lay on here, some of you!" Boss Maddox called, struggling with Pinsent's arm. "Get that other arm! — Dago! Frenchy! Jackson! Darkie! Look alive with it! Drop it, Foxy! Drop it! What the devil's up with you?"

And Stingo's strained whispers, in jerks and gusts by reason of his exertions: "Easy, Percival! Easy with it! Easy, I say! You can't shift me, boy! Get that hand, Japhra! Get that hand!"

Then the smoke clears and there remains only the acrid smell of the burning, and the sense of heat.

The two were dragged apart till a safe space separated them and they fronted each other before the groups about them — their faces furious, their bodies still, but their hands plucking at the hands that held them as they made their answers.

"Struck me!" Foxy Pinsent shouted. "Struck me! By God! I'll teach him! I've been saving it up for

him a long time. Let me go, Boss! What's the sense of holding me like this? Struck me, the whelp, I tell you! I've got to have him first or last! Let me go!"

And Percival: "And more to give you, Pinsent! Teach me, eh? If I could get! — Japhra! Stingo! It's no business of yours, this! Damn your interference! Japhra! Japhra! Let go my hands!"

They cooled a little as the hands still held them and their explanations were demanded. Boss Maddox left Pinsent to other constraint and came and stood in the little space between the two groups, hands behind his back in the familiar posture, shoulders slightly hunched, head on one side, and turning it this way and that as Percival or Pinsent spoke.

Presently he looked at Stingo. "That boy's right," he said, with a jerk back at Pinsent. "He's been struck. He's Foxy. This can't end here. He's got to have his rights."

"He'll get 'em," Stingo said, with as much grimness as his huskiness could convey. "He'll get 'em if I let this lot loose. Don't you let him worry, Boss."

Boss Maddox turned squarely on Pinsent. "Give it a rest till the morning, Foxy. You boys can't fight in this darkness — not you two."

Pinsent laughed: "I'm not going to fight him. I'm going to thrash him."

"Let me go, Japhra! Boss, let's have hands off! It's our show — no one else's."

Boss Maddox went back to his first contention. "This can't end here, Stingo," and Japhra answered him: "Nay, there's blood to be let, Boss. We can't stop it — nor have call to." He released Percival while he spoke, but kept a hand on him, and motioned Stingo's

arms away. He spoke in his slow habit, and with seeming reluctance, but there was a glimmer of relish in his voice. "They've to settle it, Boss."

"Will you fight him, Pinsent?" Boss Maddox asked.

Pinsent shook off the clutches upon him. He came forward two deliberate paces, and with great deliberation stretched himself, and with great deliberation spat upon the ground. Then fixed his eye on Percival. "If he likes to get out of it with a whipping," Pinsent said, "I'll learn him the manners he wants with your whip and let him off at that. If he's got the guts to stand up, I'll roast him till he lays down." He thrust forward his body towards Percival and said mockingly: "Which way? Which way, my pretty gentleman?"

Percival's face was a white lamp in the dusky night. "Give us room!" he said.

Then Pinsent's voice lost its deliberate drawl and rasped out in a rasp that showed his breeding and showed his hate: "I want light to serve you up, my gentleman! Light and a pair of shoes! Christ! I've waited too long for this to spoil it. I've a pattern to put on that pretty face of yours — not in this dark. Where'll I fight him, Boss? Where?"

"Along the road in the morning."

Percival came up. "I'll not wait, Boss. You've heard him. I'll not wait."

Pinsent rasped: "Morning be withered! Now! Now, while I'm hot. Where'll I fight him?"

Boss Maddox peered at his watch, then looked across the booths. "Nigh midnight — few left yonder. We'll be shut down in twenty minutes. At one o'clock."

And Japhra, a strange tremble in his voice: "In your tent, Boss. The boys will want to watch this. Room there, and good light."

Boss Maddox turned to Pinsent: "Good for you? The circus tent?"

"The place for it," Pinsent said. "Sharp at one. Japhra, you and me are ring men; come and settle a point."

"Come thou to me," Japhra answered him sturdily. "Thou and I! — I knew the ring, the knuckle ring, before thou sucked."

"Come to the tent," Boss Maddox interposed. "Best settle there."

Japhra took Percival a space away. "Lay thee down," he said. His voice was frankly trembling now, and he pressed both Percival's hands in his. "Bide by my words; bide by them. Lay thee down till I return to thee. Forget thy spite against yonder fox. Ima!"

She was at his side, her hands clasped together, her face white and strained.

"Forget him his spite, and what comes, Ima. While he lies, with a rug and with his boots from his feet, bide thou there and read to him — *Crusoe*, eh? Stingo and I will make for thee, master. I am not long gone."

CHAPTER IV

FOXY PINSENT *v.* JAPHRA'S GENTLEMAN

I

VISITORS to the booths who had stayed late that night went home complaining of the abruptness with which the shows were closed and of the uncouth way in which showmen who had fawned and flattered for their patronage suddenly seemed no more occupied with them than to bustle them off the ground and set their faces townwards.

But visitors were not in the line of communication that flashed that amazing news around the camp:

"Heard it?"

"No!"

"Foxy Pinsent's to fight Japhra's Gentleman in the marquee!"

"What of it?"

"What of it, yer muddy thick? What of it? Not a show — private! Had a scrap and to fight it out!"

"Eh? Fac'? No! When?"

"One o'clock. When the ground's clear." And, with a nod at the sightseers, "Get 'em out, mate! Get 'em out! Stars and stripes! What a knock-out!"

So, as the Fiery Cross among the Highland glens rushed with incredible swiftness, leaving in its wake a trail of mad commotion, the message flashed from mouth to mouth, booth to booth, van to van — received with utter incredulity, grasped with wildest excitement, relished with a zeal that caused every other thought and

object to be abandoned, and resulted in a tide of feverish agitation to be at leisure for details and for the business that drove out naphtha flares and visitors alike as it swept across the ground. For there was more in the fight than the rare thrill of fight itself. It was accepted everywhere as the meeting by champion of the two factions; and the bickerings of many months, the final poison of that day's events, rushed a savage zest into the appetites that waited the encounter. Foxy Pinsent was Boss Maddox's party, coat off to put that Stingo crowd properly in its place; Japhra's Gentleman was the Stingo following, girt at last to collect a little on account for much outstanding debt. When, towards one o'clock, the surging crowd outside the marquee made a sudden movement forward and into the tent, it entered with rival cries, taunts, faction jeers — and separated, as a barrier had divided it, into two bodies that faced in mutual mock across the ring that had been formed.

They found preparations at the point of completion, done by half a dozen principles that Boss Maddox had called in, who stood conferring with him now on final arrangements — Stingo, with Ginger Cronk and Snowball White of Japhra's booth; Foxy Pinsent, hands in the pockets of his long yellow coat, with Buck Osborn and others of his Academy of Boxing and School of Arms — Pink Harman, Dingo Spain, Nut Harris. At a little distance Japhra stood with Percival. He had towels on his arm, a sponge in his hand, and as the crowd took up their places he turned and called a single word across the arena to the group within the ring.

"Gloves?" he called.

Pinsent answered him. Pinsent took his hands from the pockets of his coat and curved up two brown fists. "There's no gloves between us," he called back; and at

his words the two groups of spectators drew as it were one long breath of relish — "Ah-h-h!" that hardened to murmurs of grim satisfaction, each man to his neighbour — "The raw 'uns!" "The knuckle!" "The knuckle!" "The raw 'uns!" and broke into individual bickerings, cries of derision, across the ring; and thence into a sudden wordless shouting, one party against the other — a blaring vent of old antagonism fermented by new cause that made the animals in the menagerie cages at the end of the arena leap from uneasy slumber to spring against their bars and join their chorus to a chorus brutish as their own.

II

To a renewed outburst of that clamour — the thing was on the tick of beginning — Ima raised the flap that covered the entrance to the marquee and stepped within. Simultaneously the shouting stilled with a sudden jerk that left an immense silence — Foxy Pinsent had stepped into the ring.

She stopped as if the sudden stillness struck her; and she took in the scene, her hands clasped against her breast.

The ring had been contrived within the inner circle that forms the working part of a circus arena. The canvas belt, some two feet high, that surrounded this circle during a performance, had been taken up as to the arc farthest from where she stood and brought forward to the great pole of the marquee. The wide half circle thus bounded was made the ring for the fight. Around the tent the lights above the seats had been extinguished; the great lamp of many burners that encircled the mast enclosed the ring in its arc of clear light. In the surrounding dimness, as Ima paused and watched, were the

high tiers of red-draped, empty benches. Within the light's arc she saw the rival crowds on either hand; straight before her the gap that separated the two clusters and declared their enmity. At the centre front of each, against the canvas that bounded the ring, was a little caving-in of the throng where men in their shirt-sleeves knelt. Pinsent had just stepped out from this knot on the one side: in the other she saw Percival seated on her father's knee. A hundred men and more were behind Pinsent, behind Percival forty or fewer; there was significance in how each throng stood closely packed, refusing the accommodation that the ample space between them offered — hatred was deep that preferred the discomfort of jostling and tiptoe standing to easier view at the price of mingling. Every face was beneath a peaked cap or dented bowler hat and above a scarfed neck; a pipe in most caused, as it were, a grey, shifting bank of smoke, cut flat by the darkness above the lamp's reflection, to be swaying above the caps as though they balanced it. Here and there were clumps of colour where women in blouses of red or white clustered together. Sweat, for the place was hot, glistened on this face and on that as if the grey, shifting bank above them exuded drops of water. There was something very sinister, very eerie, in the complete silence that for a moment held the scene; and Ima started to hear a sound of breathing and of restless movement. She looked around. On either hand of where she stood the menagerie cages were banked. Dark or tawny forms were coiled or stretched there; in one cage was a big wolf, head down, nose at the bars, that watched the light as she watched it.

She went quickly forward to where she saw her father. Impatient way was made for her. Japhra was talking earnestly to Percival, and they scarcely seemed to notice

her. She slipped down beside them, her knees against the canvas, and sat on her heels, her hands clasped at their full extension. She had said she would not come. She had found she must. While she had been with Percival waiting Japhra's return after the scene with Pinsent he had begun the contrition he had come to her to express. She suffered him nothing of it. "That is left where we laid it among the bracken," she told him. "Let it abide there. Look already what has come of it. If I had stayed with thee, this had not happened."

But her leaving him, and why she left, and his following her, and what came then, were of the train of the tricks and chances that shaped for him this day.

III

Boss Maddox spoke. "They're going to fight," he said, taking up a position against the mast and addressing the gathering in his dry, authoritative way — "They're going to fight, and you can count yourselves lucky to see it. If any one interferes — out he goes. Everything's settled. If any one sees anything he don't think right or according to rule he can go outside and look for it — keep his mouth shut while he's going and go quick. Three minute rounds. One minute breathers. Ten count for the knock-out. Stingo 'll stand here with the watch. I'm referee. And I'm boss — bite on that. Come along, Foxy."

Pinsent, who had stepped over the canvas and strolled to the centre of the ring as Ima entered, was still in the long yellow coat, still with his hands in his pockets. He liked to have all those eyes upon him. He liked to give pause and opportunity for the thought that this fine figure standing here had fought in class rings and bore a reputation that gentlemen in shirt-fronts had paid

gold to see at battle. He suffered usually a slight nervousness at the first moment of stepping into those class rings: to-night and here he had an exultant feeling, and he carried it with a most effective swagger. He knew Percival could box. He had watched him spar in Japhra's booth. He knew, to express his own thoughts, there 'd be a little bit of mixin' up at the outset; but he knew, as only Japhra among them all also knew, that to his own skill that had put him in a good rank of his weight he added the experience, the craft, the morale of a score and more class fights, and that such a quality is to be reckoned as a third arm against that poor thing — a "novice." "A novice, Boss!" he had said to Boss Maddox an hour before. "A novice — I lay there's more'n a few 'ud stop this fight if they knew what I was fighting. 'Strewth! I'd not do it myself but for what I've been saving up against the whelp!"

What he had been saving up came poisonously to his mind as he stood there, driving away even the flavour of the admiration he felt he was receiving. At last the price for that "Foxy" he had been dubbed and had endured. At last that price! Folk had come to the booths to see Japhra's Gentleman, had they! — A price for that! That smack in the mouth an hour ago! — A price for that! a big price and he would have it to the full!

The foxy smile contracted his mouth and eyes as he began to draw the scarf from his neck, slipped the long yellow coat, and peeled a sweater. A delighted cry went up from his supporters — good old Foxy had done them the honour of appearing in his class ring kit! Japhra, whispering last earnest words in Percival's ear, looked up at the cry, and twisted up his face at what he saw. Naked but for the tight boxing trunks and boxing boots, Pinsent declared himself a rare figure of a fighting ma-

chine. Japhra knew the points. Pinsent threw out his arms at right angles to his sides and drew a long breath. Japhra saw the big round chest spring up and expand as a soap bubble at a breath through the pipe — the cleft down the bone between the big chest muscles; the tense, drumlike look of the skin where it swept into waist from the lower ribs; the ridge from neck to shoulder on either side where the head of the back muscles showed; the immense span of the arms, rooted in great hitting shoulders that, at such length and along such well-packed arms, would drive the fists like engine rods. He scaled a shade over ten stone, Japhra guessed. Percival would be little above nine-and-a-half; and in Pinsent's uncommonly long legs — their length accentuated by the brief boxing-drawers — Japhra saw a further and most dangerous quality in his armoury. He swung an arm and side-stepped to his left as Japhra watched; and Japhra's lips twitched. The left leg not slid the foot but lifted it and put it away and down, more with the ease of an arm action than of a leg — as a spider lifts and places; up, two feet away, the body perfectly poised on the right; down, and in a flash the body alert upon it — down, and in a flash the arm extended and back again with the stab of a serpent's tongue. There went up a murmur of applause at the consummate ease of the action, and Japhra turned to Percival with whispered repetition of last words.

"Thou seest that?" he whispered. "Thou must follow, follow; press him; give him no rest. In-fighting, in-fighting, quick as thou canst hit!"

Earnest anxiety was in his voice as he spoke and in his lined face that was all twisted up so that every line became a pucker, as a withered apple that is squeezed in the hand.

"Now bide me a last time," he said. "He hath no

bowels for punishment. There is a coward streak in him — I have seen it. That thou must find by following, following — quick as thou canst sling them. Good for thee that he has chosen the knuckle. Thou hast used thy hands. That fox yonder hath been too fine a swell these years to pull and carry, shift and load as thou hast done. He will rue his choice when his knuckles bruise; thine like stone. He will use his tongue on thee, mocking thee. Pay no heed to that. He will use his ring tricks. Watch for them. Up now! they are ready for thee. My life is in this fight, little master — punish, punish, punish; give him no peace — it resteth on that. All the luck!"

He slipped Percival's coat, and Percival stepped across the canvas and went where Pinsent waited him in the centre. He wore the dress in which he boxed in the booth — white flannel trousers, a vest of thin gauze, white canvas shoes with rubber soles. He carried his arms at his sides, twisting up his fingers to make toughest those fists that Japhra had said were like stone. He held his head high, looking straightly at Pinsent; stopped within an arm's length of him and turned his eyes informatively to Boss Maddox, then direct into Pinsent's again.

His covered limbs joined with his few pounds' lesser weight to make him appear the slighter figure of the two. "Going to eat him!" a voice behind Pinsent broke out.

"Going to muddy well eat him!" and Pinsent's mouth and eyes contracted into their foxy smile at the words.

"Ready?" from Boss Maddox. "All right, Stingo. Get along with it."

"Time!" said Stingo's husky whisper; and, as a hand laid to the wire of dancing puppets, the word jerked both figures into movement.

CHAPTER V

A FIGHT THAT IS TOLD

I

THEY tell that fight along the road to-day. Old men who saw it want never a listener when the talk turns on boxing and they can say: "Ah, but I saw Japhra's Gentleman and Foxy Pinsent back in Boss Maddox's time."

I tell it as it is told.

Why (the old men say), why, this Japhra's Gentleman, mark me, he was one of the quick-ones — one of the movers, one of the swift-boys, one of the dazzlers, one of the few! He come in *tic-tac! tic-tac! tic-tac!* — quicker'n my old jaws can say it: *Left-right! left-right! left-right!* — like his two fists was a postman's knock. Pinsent never see nothing like it. He was one of the class ones, this Pinsent — one of the pretty ones, one of the sparrers, one of the walk-rounds, talk-rounds, one of the wait-a-bits; never in no hurry, the class-ring boys — all watching first to see what a man's got for 'em. He muddy soon saw, Foxy! Foxy never see nothing like it. First along, he prop this quick-boy off, an' prop him off, an' prop him off; an' catch him fair and rattle him, an' smash him one and stagger him, an' side-step an' shake him up; but still he come, and still he come, and still he come; *tic-tac! tic-tac! tic-tac!* ah, he was one of the quick-ones, one of the dazzlers, one of the steel-boys.

Pinsent never see nothing like it. He come back after

the first round thinking this was novice stuff — going all out like that from the gong — and laughin' at the bustle of it, an' Buck Osborn an' Nut Harris an' his boys laughin' back at him. Second round he come back an' give a bit of a spit on the ground an' ease up his trunks an' look thoughtful. Third round he step back slowly 's if he'd a puzzle to think about, — third round I mind me Dingo, Dingo Spain, chip him friendly while he pass the sponge over him, and Foxy turn on him like he had the devil in his eyes. "What in hell's that to you?" he give him. "Keep your grins in your ugly mouth," he give him, "lest you want me to wipe it for you!" He was rattled some, that foxy one; not hurted much — one of the tough ones, Foxy — but bothered by it an' not quite sure what to make of it, like a man with a wops buzzin' round his head — that was the like of it with that quick-boy comin' at him, an' comin' at him, an' comin' at him.

Ay, but he was one of the tough ones, Foxy — one of the lie-lows, one of the shifty ones, one of the snaky-boys, one of the cautions! He went out fourth round for to serve it up to that quick-boy with some of his crafty bits. I like a bit o' craft meself. I was a Maddox man, me, an' I set up a holler, an' we all holler, take my word, when we see Foxy servin' of it up to that quick-boy like he lay hisself to do then. Give his tongue to him a treat, he did. Walkin' out to him — tiptoe an' crouchin' at him. "What, you're in a hurry, my gentleman!" he chips him. "You'll make yourself hot, my pretty pet, if you don't steady down," he chips him. "That's not lady's manners, runnin' about like you've been," he chips him.

That quick-boy come at him an' he slip a bit of craft on him quick as a snake. Side-step, he did, that foxy

one; an' duck an' say, "Where's your manners?" an' rake his head across an' butt that quick-boy's stomach so he grunts; an' up an' hook him one, an' follow him an' lash him one, an' "Mind your manners, you bastard!" he says an' half across the ring an' waitin' for him. Three times he butt him so, an' each time hook him one, an' all the time lip-lippin' of him, an' us boys hollerin' an' Stingo's boys hollerin' an' the animals in the cages hollerin' back on us. Holler! — I mind me I was in a fair muck sweat with it.

Back he goes again, next round, that foxy one, an' "Why, dear, dear, you've got some beauty-spots on your face, my pretty gentleman!" he chips him. "Come an' let's paint 'em up a bit for you, my little lady!" he chips him. Ay, that was a round, that one! That Japhra, — a rare one that Gipsy Japhra — had been talkin' to that quick-boy whiles he had him on his knee; an' when he comes in, an' that foxy one goes to rake him with buttin' him again, he step back, that quick-boy, for to cut him as he come out. I see the move — but that foxy one! All craft that foxy one was — one of the snaky ones, one of the tough boys, one of the coves! 'Stead o' swingin' through with his head, he swing up and hook his left 'un with it, an' chin that quick-boy one, an' "Paint!" he says, "There's paint for you, you dog!" an' lash him one where he had a little mouse-lump over his eye; an' true enough, the paint splits across an' comes streaky down that quick-boy's face.

You'd ha' thought — I lay me I know what that foxy one thought. Blood fierce went that foxy one when he see that blood, an' in he goes, fierce after blood, for to finish it; leaved off his craft and went in for to hammer him. He muddy soon goed back to craft again, Foxy! That quick-boy shook his head an' run back; an' draws a

breath an' meets him; an' throats him one an' staggers him; an' draws a breath an' follows him; an' pastes him one an' grunts him; an' *tic-tac! tic-tac! tic-tac!* an' follows him, an' follows him, an' follows him. Like a wops he was — like a bull-tarrier he was, an' that foxy one gets all muddled with him, an' runs back puzzled with him, an' then catches hold of hisself, an' stops hisself — I reckon he wondered where 'n hell he'd be soon if he didn't — and puts in that duck an' butt craft again; an' that quick-boy steadies for him like old Japhra bin teachin' of him; an' when that foxy one swings across, that quick-boy smashes up under him — *crack!* like a stone-breaker with his hammer; an' that foxy one come back to us with his mouth split, an' his chin red; an' while he sit blowin' take a toof out; an' while he sit blowin' get it drip-drop on his chest from where the blood run to his chin.

II

But Percival had suffered under the punishment of these savage encounters, and under the immense exertions of that unceasing in-fighting to which Japhra had urged him. Back on Japhra's knee, "I've dosed him, Japhra," he said. "He's taking all I can give him." There was a sob in his quick breathing as he spoke, and he smiled weakly and leant back against Japhra's shoulder.

Japhra's eyes were sunk in his twisted face to twin points of glistening light. His voice trembled, and his hand as he plied the sponge. "He will not drink much more," he said. "Thou art hot after that coward streak in him. I mark the signs of it. Keep up the dose, master! Never such a fight — and never thy like! never thy

like! Follow him, son of mine — follow him! follow him! A last call on thyself! Watch him where he sucks his tender knuckles."

Pinsent knew better than Japhra the tenderness of those bruised knuckles of his: he knew too that he was housing an uneasy feeling beneath his belt, born of the bewildering persistence of his opponent and of the punishing fists which that persistence pressed upon him, giving him no peace. He was sore; he had reached the point when blows were beginning to hurt him — and that was a point beyond which he knew it was dangerous for him to delay proceedings.

Again! He came forward with a trick in his mind that he had seen and that he had once playfully practised on Buck Osborn. Thought of it helped him to his foxy smile that was a grotesque burlesque of itself as he made it with his swollen mouth; but again! — again that steel-springed fury was on him, following him, following him, following him. Pinsent must needs use his fists to try to check its rushes; when he effected a savage blow the jar at his knuckles made him wince. Twice he went backwards round the ring — a third time and feinted a stumble as he moved his feet. It made his chance. Percival, coming too quick, ran full into him. He ducked, then drove up his head with all his force beneath the other's jaw.

The trick succeeded better than when he had seen it and marked it for future use. Jarred to the point of unconsciousness, Percival staggered back, his arms wide. At the exposed throat Pinsent drove his left fist with all the driving power his body and legs could give it; with the dull *wup!* of a wet sheet beaten on stone Percival went his full length and full length lay.

"Time!" throated Stingo; and at the word the facing crowds, that as one man had caught their breaths, went into two tumults of jostling figures, tossing arms, and of brazen throats before whose thunders, beating the air like thunder's self, Japhra, Ginger Cronk, Snowball White, and One Eye bent their heads as they came rushing forward.

"Time!" Japhra snarled at Pinsent. "Out of this, thou foul-play fox!"

"Out you!" Pinsent shouted. He stood over the prostrate form, breathing quick, one arm curved back as if it held a stabbing sword: "Out you! Enough o' this! Private between him an' me now. Stand out and let him up for me! Out!"

"Boss! Boss!" Japhra called, and dropped on his knees by Percival, dizzily rising on an elbow. "Boss! Boss! What's this? Order him out! Have him out!"

"Play fair!" "Fight fair!" — with cries and oaths the Stingo men pressed to the canvas, shaking fists aloft; with cries and oaths and tossing fists were answered. A Stingo man put his leg over the canvas and half his body into the ring: a leg and flushed face struck out on the other side. Then in a rush men broke across the canvas, poured into the ring, and met in two raging, foul-mouthed banks that strained about the boxers.

Boss Maddox thrust his way forward. "Ge' back! Ge' back! I'll have 'ee out the tent, every man of 'ee! Ge' back! Ge' back! By God, I'll have the lamp out!" And he fought his way back to the mast and stretched his hand to the chain that released the extinguishers upon the burners.

A Stingo and a Maddox man, catching each the other's eye as the two sides bayed and jostled, made private cause of the common brawl, and closed with clutching

hands. Another pair engaged, and now another — whirled in that tossing mob, and flung the crowd this way and that in their furious grappling, like fighting tigers in a stockade breaking in pieces at their violence.

Boss Maddox's iron throat like a trumpet across the din: "The light goes! The light goes!"

It flickered; savage hands tore at the fighters, savage feet kicked furious commands; flickered again — and suddenly the immense clamour went to a cry, to a broken shout, to peace.

Pinsent pushed his way to the front. "Easy, Boss — I want that light. I've a job to finish," he said; and in the laugh that went up, added, "The boys 'll be all right." He threw his arms apart in gesture of command. "Out o' the ring!" he cried. "You're robbin' me of it. Gettin' his wits back! I'd ha' cut him out by now!"

Three parts supporting Percival, Japhra with Ginger Cronk and the rest had taken him back through the mob and supported him while they tended him. . . . The tumult gave him five minutes, and he was sitting up as the men returned growling to their places. He looked at Ima, crouching by him, read the entreaty in her eyes, and answered it and at the same time answered Japhra's trembling "How of it, master?" by shaking his head. "No!" he said, "No!" and felt Japhra's arms tighten about him.

Another heard him and pressed forward. It was Egbert Hunt, tears running down his face.

"You ain't going on?" he cried. "You ain't going on! Stop it, Mr. Japhra! Stop this murder!"

Japhra's left arm was about Percival's body, his right hand used the sponge. Those near him for the first and only time heard him use a coarse expression. As he were some tigress above a threatened cub, he drew Percival

closer to him and turned savagely up at Egbert's pallid face. "Shut thy bloody, coward mouth!" he cried at him. "Men's work here! Quit thee, thou whelp!"

The ring was clear. Pinsent came out, sucking a fist. Percival got to his feet, stood a moment, the blood that had dripped to his chest the red badge of courage flying there — then walked forward.

Somewhere in the crowd a woman's voice shot up hysterically: "God love yer, Gentleman!" it shrilled — "Y 're pluck! Pluck!"

III

That foxy one (the old men say) he come out sucking his fistses that were gone more like messy orindges than any fistses ever I see. He see that quick-boy rockin' a bit on his feet where he stood, an' he spit his fist out his mouth an' he run slap down at him for to knock him off his legs by runnin' into him. He run at him hard as he could pelt, that foxy one; an' that quick-boy stan' 's if he was dreamin' an' never see nothin' of him. Ah, but that quick-boy could have fought if he was asleep, I reckon me! He slip aside, squeeze aside, twist aside jus' as that foxy one reach him; so quick he twist, us what was watchin' the ground for to see him go there never see him move. I reckon that foxy one never did neither. He muddy soon knowed, though, Foxy! He go sprawlin' by, an' as he go that quick-boy clip him one an' help him go an' stumble him. Round he come, that foxy one, savage with it; an' that quick-boy dreamin' there again; an' rush him for to rush him down again; an' this time that quick-boy, too tired for to shift by the look of it, let him have it as he come fair under the eye, an' Foxy jus' swing him one on the cheek, an' that shift

him like he shift hisself before; an' he clip that foxy one the other fist a clip you could ha' heard far as yonder tree; an' clip that same eye again; an' us see the blood run up into Foxy's peeper; an' that foxy one shake his head, an' shake his head, like he was blinded with it. He shake a muddy lot more, Foxy, afore he was through! He set in for to do the rushing then, like that quick-boy had done first along; an' that quick-boy's turn, dreamin' there, for to do the proppin' off. But he not rush like that quick-boy rush. He shake his head an' have a go at him; an' that quick-boy prop him off an' wait for him; an' he shake his head an' walk round a bit, an' *ur!* he go, an' rush at him; an' that quick-boy wake hisself an' prop him off; an' he suck his fist an' wipe his eye, an *ur!* he come again: and that quick-boy twist hisself an' give him one — *crack!* my life, his fistses was like stones, that quick-boy's!

Ah, my word! my word! then they got at it. That old Japhra — a rare one, that Gipsy Japhra! — sing out "Cut in! Cut in! little master!" and that quick-boy gives a heave of hisself an' they meet, those two, slapper-dash! slapper-dash! this way! that way! punchin', punchin'! an' they fall away, those two, an' breathe theirselves, an' pant theirselves; an' that foxy one has his mouth all anyhow an' fair roarin' of his breath through it; an' his head all twisty-ways with only one eye for watchin' with; an' they rush those two — my life! they were rare ones! Hit as they come, those two — an' that put the stopper on it. Like stones — *crack!* like stones — my word on it, their fists met, an' Foxy drop his left arm like it was broke at the elbow. Then he takes it! Like a bull-tarrier!—like a bull-tarrier, my word on it, that quick-boy lep' at him. *One!* he smash him an' heart him, an' I see that foxy one glaze in his eye an'

stagger with it. *Two!* that quick-boy drive him an' rib him, an' I hear that foxy one grunt an' see him waggle up his hanging arm an' drop it. *Three!* that quick-boy smash him an' throat him, an' back he goes, that foxy one; an' crash he goes! an' flat he lies — an', my life! to hear the breathing of him!

Life of me! there was never a knock-out like it; never one could do it like that quick-boy done it! Never no one as quick as that quick-boy when first along he come *tic-tac! tic-tac! tic-tac!* left-right! left-right! left-right! Never one could come again after he was bashed like that quick-boy come. Never his like! One of the rare ones, one of the clean-breds, one of the true-blues, one of the all-rights, one of the get-there, stop-there, win-there — one o' the picked!

IV

Quivering in silence the facing crowds stood while the count went.

"Nine!" throated Stingo — scarcely a whisper.

Stillness while perhaps five seconds passed. Then Boss Maddox opened his hands towards the ring in an expressive gesture.

Then men came rushing to Pinsent and shook him: "Up, Foxy! Up!" Then Pinsent drew up his knees, groaned, and seemed to collapse anew. Then, then the storm burst in a bellow of sound, in a rush of figures. All, all of clamour that had gone before — of exultation, hate, defiance, blood-want, rage — seemed now to bind up in two clanging rolls of thunder that in thunder went, in thunder thundered back, and thundered on again. Percival turned and saw Japhra running towards him, an arm's length in advance of the mob that followed. He

fell into Japhra's arms, felt himself pressed, pressed to Japhra's heart, heard in his ears "Never thy like! Son of mine, never thy like!" He knew a driving mob behind his back, before, and all about him—heard curses, grapplings, blows. Heard Japhra's cry "Up with him! Up!" felt himself borne aloft and dimly was conscious that his bearers were staggered this way and that by the flood that surged about them. . . . Sudden darkness, and sudden most delicious air and sudden most delicious rain was his next impression — they had got him outside the tent. . . . At his next he was in the van, on his couch, smiling at those who bent above him.

CHAPTER VI

THE STICKS COME OUT — AND A KNIFE

I

"How dost thou go?" Japhra asked.

"Why, my face is sore," Percival said — "sore! it feels as if I had only a square inch of skin stretched to cover the lot. I'm right as rain otherwise. That was a fight, Japhra!"

"Never its like!" Japhra answered him huskily — "never its like! Thou art the fighting type, my son. Long ago I said it. This night hath proved me!"

Percival sighed most luxuriously. Pleasant, pleasant to be lying there — bruised, tired, sore, but weariness and wounds bound up with victory. He put up a hand and took Ima's fingers that touched his face with ointment. "That's fine, Ima!" he smiled at her. "I saw you crying. You oughtn't to have been there. Did you think I was done for?"

She shook her head; tears were still in her eyes.

"Well, it's over now," he said affectionately. "Dry those eyes, Ima!"

She gave a catch at her breath. "Well, I am a woman," she told him, and her gentle fingers anointed his face again.

Their caress assisted him into drowsiness. Without opening his eyes he inquired presently:

"What's all that row? There's a frightful noise somewhere, isn't there?"

Japhra, who was looking through the forward window into the early dawn of the summer morning, turned to Ima and shook his head. She took his meaning and answered Percival: "It rains heavily. There is a storm coming up."

He dropped into slumber.

II

But the noise he had heard was heavier than the rain that streamed upon the van's roof; there raged outside a fiercer storm than the thunder-clouds massing up on the wind. It had been many seasons brooding; it was charged to the point of bursting when the two factions came shouting from the marquee after the fight. Swept up with arrogant glee, the Stingo men paraded with hoots and jeers before the Maddox vans. A stone came flying through the gloom and cracked against a tall man's cheek. He stooped for it with a curse, sent it whistling, and the crash of glass that rewarded his aim was the signal for a scramble for stones — smashing of windows, splintering of wood.

There came a wild rush of men from behind the Maddox vans. Japhra, watching from his window, turned swiftly and took up the stout limb of ash he commonly carried. He gave it a deft twirl in a tricky way that spoke of the days when single-stick work figured at the fairs, and looked at Ima with his tight-lipped smile.

"The sticks are out!" he said grimly. "I knew it would end thus;" and as he opened the door and dropped to the ground there came to him from many throats the savage cry — glad to the tough old heart of him that once had told Percival, "Ay, a camp fight with the sticks out and the heads cracking is a proper game for a man" — of

"Sticks! Sticks!" ; and one that came running past him toward the press shouted to him: "Japhra? Good on yer! The sticks are out! The ——s ha' come at us with sticks!"

It was Snowball White. "This way with it, boy," Japhra told him as they ran. "Thy stick thus — with a hand at each end across thy head. Crack at a pate right hand or left when thou seest one — then back to overhead to guard thine own again. I have been out with the sticks. I know the way of it."

III

Weight of numbers had told their tale when Percival got a glimpse of the fierce work.

"I'm fit — I'm absolutely fit, I tell you!" he had told Ima when, awakened by the sounds that now had raged close to the Stingo vans, and recognising them for what they were, he had shaken off her protests and entreaties and had come to the scene.

"Lie here while they're fighting us! Why, you'd be ashamed of me, you know you would!" he had cried; but when he was outside, and had gone a few steps in the rain that now was sheeting down, he was informed how weak he was, and was caught and spun dizzily back by a sudden mob of men driven towards him, and was held dizzy and fainting by the panting breaths and by the reek of sweating bodies that wedged him where he stood.

He was packed in a mob of his Stingo mates, half of whom could not free their arms for use and about three sides of whom the Maddox mob were baying, driving them further and further back against the vans with sticks that rattled on sticks and on heads like the crack-

ling of trees in a wood fire. Two forms, taller than the rest, upstood clearly — near Percival old Stingo, hatless, blood on a cheek, and throating "Hut! Hut, boys! Hut!" with each stroke he made; further away Boss Maddox, pale, grim and iron of countenance as ever even in this fury, and using his long reach to strike with deadly precision at heads half a dozen men in front of him.

The two were working towards one another, Percival could see, and a sudden surge of the crowd brought him almost within reach of Boss Maddox's stick. It was at that moment that he felt a jostling at his ribs as of someone burrowing past him from behind, looked down and recognised Egbert Hunt — shut in by accident and trying to escape, Percival guessed.

"Hullo! You're going the wrong way to get out," he told him.

Egbert Hunt thrust up and filled his lungs as a diver might rise for air. He peered in the direction of Boss Maddox, and went down again. "I know which way I'm going," he said, and squirmed ahead — feeling and thrusting with his outstretched left hand, his right in the pocket of his coat.

Stingo and Maddox met. Each stood high above those about them and each had a cry of challenge for the other as their sticks joined. "Hut!" grunted Stingo and slashed to Boss Maddox's shoulder.

Percival saw the stick caught where it had slipped from its mark and gone into the press; saw Boss Maddox shake himself for freer action and the crowd give way from about him; saw him swing up his arm and poise his stick a dreadful second clear above Stingo's unprotected head — then saw him give an awkward stagger, saw the raised stick slip down between his fingers, heard

him grunt and saw him drop down and disappear as a man beneath whose feet the ground had opened.

There arose almost simultaneously, high above the din of sticks and oaths, a scream of shocking sound and horrid meaning — "A knife! A knife!" the scream shot up — "A knife! Some bastard 's used a knife!"

It swept across the struggling men, stopped them, and was cried from throat to throat as though through the night there jarred some evil bird circling with evil cry: "A knife! A knife! Some one's knifed!"

And then again that first voice screamed: "Boss Maddox 's knifed! The Boss is murdered!"

And another, most beastly: "Christ! it's pourin' out of 'im. Boss! Boss! 'Oo's done it on yer?"

And a third: "Boss! Boss! God ha' mercy! — he's dead! dead!"

And one that sprung up in panic and smashed a panic blow at the man behind him: "Dead! Dead! Gi' us room, blast yer!"

And one that sprung upright, held in his hand aloft that which caught the dull morning gleam, and screamed "Here y'are! Here's what done it! Blood on the haft!"

IV

A thud of hoofs broke into the silence in which the crowd stood held. A jingle of accoutrements; a sharp voice that called: "What's up? What's wrong here? Who called murder?" a breaking away right and left of the mob; and into the lane instinctively formed to where the body lay a mounted constable rode, pulled up his horse and cried again: "What's up? What's wrong here?"

He was answered. Scarcely the fearful whisper "Police! Police!" had run to the outskirts of the crowd,

when one that had knelt sprung raving to his feet, tossed aloft two hands dark with blood, and shouted: "I called murder! There's murder here! Boss Maddox's got a knife in him!" His shouting went to a scream: "One o' they's done it!" he screamed. "One o' they! One o' Stingo's bastards!"

There had been mutterings of thunder and swiftly gathering darkness that submerged the summer morning's gleam. Tremendous upon that accusing scream there now broke out of heaven great reverberating rolls of sound as of heaven demanding answer to that cry. The sheeting rain burst with a torrent's fury — a great stab of lightning almost upon the very camp; then pitchy black and thunder's roll again.

To the Stingo crowd it gave the last effect to the mounting panic that had mounted in them on successive terrors of "A knife!" "Boss Maddox's knifed!" "Boss Maddox's dead!" "Police! Police!" and "One o' they! One o' they! One o' Stingo's bastards!"

Murder had been done. The Blue Boys were out. With one of their own number lay the guilt. There cried to them "Away! Away!", all the instinct that, since first law came on the land, has bade roadmen, gipsies, outlaws, take immediate flight from trouble. "Away!" it screamed; and by common impulse there was a break and a rush to their vans of the Stingo men; and in the pitchy blackness and in primeval shudder at every roll of thunder, drenched by the streaming downpour, lit as the lightning snatched up the cloak of night, there were panic harnessing and panic cries: "One o' us! One o' us done it! D'yer see the Blue Boy on his 'orse? — more of 'em coming! 'Old still! — still, blast yer! Up wi' that shaft! — up! Hell take this buckle! Are yer fixed? One o' us! One o' us!"

A van, speedier ready than its neighbours, rolled off, its driver flogging the horse from the forward platform. A blinding torch from heaven flamed down about it. The constable, giving directions by the prone figure — "He's not dead; knot those scarves together; lift, and bind 'em so" — shaded his eyes from the glare; then jumped for his horse. "Stop that van! None's to leave here! Stop 'em! stop 'em!"

Away! Away! — thundering hoofs; rocking wheels; a van overturned, and groans and curses; pursuers driven down or smashed at where they climbed the steps; the constable surrounded by those who ran beside the van he followed, dragged from his saddle, hurled aside, and his horse sent galloping.

Away! Away! — blindly into the night.

And in the night, two miles afield, one that ran with streaming face and labouring chest and that muttered "I done it on 'im — me, served like a dog before 'em all — I done it on him, the tyrang!"

V

Percival was changing his dripping clothes. Complete exhaustion had him. The bruises on his face had hardened to ugly colours, and Japhra, chiding him for having left the van, saw with concern an uglier colour yet that burned behind the bruises and whose cause made his wet body burning to the touch.

"Bed for thee! — no changing!" he said; and was answered by Percival: "Japhra! I saw him pitch and drop!"

"I have helped bear him to his van. . . . I saw him struck."

There had never left Percival's mind him that went

thrusting past in the press, right hand in pocket. His eyes questioned Japhra and were answered by Japhra's. Then he said, "Egbert Hunt?"

"Egbert Hunt."

"What's going to happen now, Japhra?"

Strange how tricks and chances go! All that day's chain of tricks, all its train of chances, had brought Percival straight to the import of Japhra's words.

"This night hath ended this life, master. Stingo sells his stock and back to his brother near thy home. Tomorrow, new roads for me."

Percival scarcely heard him. Japhra made an exclamation and caught him in his arms.

"Ima!"

She came from where she had waited behind her curtain.

"Help me here — then to Boss Maddox's van where they bring a doctor. This night hath struck down this heart of ours."

CHAPTER VII

JAPHRA AND IMA. JAPHRA AND AUNT MAGGIE

I

THE van brought Percival back to Aunt Maggie.

Japhra and Ima, waiting the doctor's arrival, watched and tended the signs of how, as Japhra had said, the night had struck Percival down. From the moment of his collapse in Japhra's arms, his vitality no longer withstood the strain to which it had been pressed. His mind gave way beneath the attack of the events of the past hours; marshalled now by fever's hand they returned to him in riot of delirium. "Don't, Ima! Don't! . . . No! No! I'm all right! I'm better standing! . . . Only a kiss in fun, Ima! O God, if I had only known! . . . Murdered! Where's Hunt? Murder! Poor old Hunt! . . . In-fighting! I must get in! If only I can stick out this round! . . . Ge' back! Ge' back! What's Boss Maddox yelling about? . . . In! — I must get in! I will get in! . . . Ima! For me! O God, what a thing to happen! Only in fun! Only in fun, Ima! . . . Follow him! Follow him! I must get in at him. . . ."

When he was momentarily in silence Japhra looked a question at Ima.

She answered quite simply: "I told him that I loved him."

"And he?" Japhra said.

She arranged the bedclothes, and with a fond touch

smoothed back Percival's hair; then looked at her father and smiled bravely and shook her head.

"I have known it these many days," Japhra told her. "I have watched thee." He placed his hand on hers where it caressed Percival's forehead. "What of comfort have I for thee?" he said. "My daughter, none. He is not of us. Hearken to this thought, Ima. Heaven shapeth its vessels for the storms they must meet. Some larger thing calleth that grace of form and that rareness of spirit that he hath. What profit then for us to sorrow?"

Because he saw her crying, he repeated: "What profit?"

"Well, I am a woman," she said. "My love is of a different sort from thine."

He stroked her hair. "My daughter, wouldst thou unlive the past?"

She replied: "Nay, it is all I have."

"So with me," he said. "This night endeth it. Thou and I — henceforward we will be alone, remembering him — happy to have loved him, happy that he hath been happy with us, happy to have been a port where he hath fitted himself a little for what sea he saileth to."

She pressed her father's hand. "As thou sayest," she said; and after a moment, bending over Percival like some mother above her child: "What awaiteth him?" she asked.

"Some strong thing," Japhra said. "I know no more — that much I know without mistake. From the first when he came to us with his quaint ways and fair face I knew it. A big fight, as I have told him."

As if she believed her father to have divination, "Will he win?" she asked him.

"He is the fighting type," Japhra replied. "Victory

for him. This night in the tent. To-morrow — whatever will. Though it be death — always victory."

She remembered that.

II

The doctor, when he came, showed himself a tough gentleman — abrupt of speech, of the type that does its rounds in the saddle — who said "Stiff crowd, you! Regular hospital here. Cracked head in every van. Boss Maddox — he's in a bad way. Now this young man. Make me fortune if you stop."

After examination: "Nursing," he said; "it's a case for nursing. He's gone over the mark. Head — and hands, by the look of 'em! Not my business that. Stiff crowd, you! Nursing. You'll have to watch it pretty sharp. That girl's got a way with him. That's what he wants."

"I am taking him home," Japhra said; "two days from here — if that be wise."

"Wisest thing. Get him out of this. Stiff crowd, you! I'll look in again midday. Send you some stuff. Then you can move. He's badly over the mark. Look after him."

Thus, on the afternoon of that day, the train of tricks and chances had Percival on the road towards Aunt Maggie and Burdon village. The police, who had taken authority in the camp, made no objection to Japhra leaving. They knew now the man they wanted; half the Maddox crowd had heard Hunt's threat to stick a knife in Boss Maddox; the blade found was scratched with his name; a score had seen him edging through the press towards the Boss; there were not wanting those who, their imagination enlarged by these hints, had seen the very blow struck. Japhra might go, the police said,

and Stingo Hannaford too. The only wanted vans were those in flight that might have the fugitive in hiding. So, while Boss Maddox, removed to the Infirmary, lay between life and death, while the Blue Boys from the police station and the tough boys from the vans scoured the country in thrill of man-hunt, Japhra harnessed up the van and struck away towards Burdon.

The patient ranged wide in his delirium during the journey — often on his lips a name that once had fallen about him like petals of the bloomy rose, sweet as they; that now struck like blows in the face at her who ceaselessly watched him:

"I know this house! Up the stairs! down the stairs! I'm tired, tired! What am I looking for? What am I looking for? Not you, Dora!—not you!... You are Snow-White-and-Rose-Red! I love you, Dora! Why do you look at me so strangely, Mr. Amber!... Rollo! Rollo, old man!—Rollo, what are you doing? She is running away from me! Let me go, Rollo! let me go!... In-fighting! I must get in! I will get in!... Dora! Dora! How I have longed for you!..."

She that watched him appeared to have a wonderful influence over him. Of its own force it seemed to give her the quality of entering the wanderings of his mind and satisfying him by answering his cries.

"In-fighting! In-fighting!" he would cry. "I must get in! I will get in!"

And she: "You are winning! There — there; look, you have won! It is ended — you have won!"

"You are Snow-White-and-Rose-Red! Dora! Dora! My Dora!"

And she, steeling herself: "I am here, Percival! Your Dora is here! Hold Dora's hand! There, rest while I stay with you!"

So through the hours.

"Post Offic" was the evening of the second day distant. Japhra walked all the way, leading the horse — movement steadier, less chance of jolting, by leading than by driving, Japhra thought; and so trudged mile on mile — guiding away from ruts, down the steep hills holding back horse and van by force amain rather than use the drag that would have jarred noisily. For the rest he walked, one hand on the bridle, the other in his pocket, his whip beneath his arm, not with the keen look and alert step that was his usual habit, but with some air that made kindly folk say in passing: "Poor gipsies! They must have a hard life, you know!"

But it was that each step brought him nearer end of a companionship that had gone with deep roots into his heart that made life for the first time seem hard to this questioner.

He would not smoke. "The reek would carry back on this breeze and through the windows to him," he told Ima, come beside him while her patient slept.

She could never remember seeing her father without his pipe, and she was touched by his simple thought. She slipped her hand into the pocket of his long coat where his hand lay, and entwined their fingers. "Ah, we love him, thou and I," she said.

She felt his fingers embrace her own. He asked her quietly: "My daughter, is it bitter for thee when he crieth Dora?"

She answered him with that poor plea of hers. "Well, I am a woman," she said. But after a little while she spoke again. "Yet I am glad to suffer so," she told him. "Though he cries Dora, it is my hand that soothes him when he so cries. He sighs then, and is comforted. It is as if he wandered in pain, and wanted me, and finding

me was happy. Well, how should I ask more? Often — many years I have prayed he should one day be mine, my own. It is not to be. But now — for a little while — when he cries and when I comfort him, why, my prayer is vouchsafed me. Mine then — my own."

III

Aunt Maggie saw that wonderful influence Ima exercised over his delirium. When Japhra had carried him up to his bedroom, and when Ima was bringing "his things" from the van, he broke out in raving and in tossing of the arms that utterly alarmed her and Honor, their efforts of no avail. She called in panic for Ima. Ima's touch and voice restored him to instant peace. "You must stay with me," Aunt Maggie said, tears running down her face. "My dear, I beg you stay with me. You are Ima. I know you well. He has often spoken of you. Oh, you will stay?"

Afterwards Aunt Maggie went down to thank Japhra for his agreement to this proposal. He would put up his van with the Hannafords, he told Ima — with Stingo, who would shortly be coming, and with Mr. Hannaford — and would stay there, whence he might come daily for news while Ima remained with Percival.

Aunt Maggie had grateful tears in her eyes when she thanked him. These, and those tears of panic when she called Ima's aid, were the first she had shed since suddenly the van had brought her Percival to her an hour before. Trembling but dry-eyed she had gone to him and seen his dangerous condition; shaking but tearless had made ready his bed.

"Strange-like"? "Touched-like"? It was fate had ordered him back to her, she told herself. Almost upon

the eve — within four short months of the twenty-first birthday for which she had planned — he was brought back; and brought back, despite himself, by an agency stronger than his own strong spirit. Fate in that! — the same fate that by Audrey's death-bed had assured her that nothing would fail her, and that by a hundred seeming chances had justified its assurance through the years.

He was very ill. She was not afraid. Fate was here — and she told Japhra he would recover.

She found him in the van, his pipe alight again and staring in a dullish way at the vacant places whence Percival's belongings had been removed. He came down to her, and when she told him her belief he had a strange look and a long look into her eyes before he answered. He had marked the tearlessness that went curiously with her devotion when he had brought her to Percival; he marked now some strange appearance she had for him and some strange note in her voice when she told him "He will recover."

"Ay, mistress," he said. "Have no fear. He will recover."

For her own part she marked also some strange look in the strangely strong eyes that regarded her.

She asked "But why are you so confident?"

He noticed the "But." "Mistress, because his type is made for a bigger thing than he has yet met."

To that — meeting so strongly the truth she knew — she replied: "Yes! — yes!"

At her tone he came a sudden step to her. "Mistress, is it in thy hands, this thing he must meet?"

She, by the influence of this meeting, stood caught up and dizzy by return to her in dreadful violence of that old fluttering within her brain.

Japhra in stern and sudden voice: "Beware it!"

He thought her eyes questioned him and he answered them: "Why have I from the first known some big thing waited him? — it was somehow told me. Why beware? — I am somehow warned."

She turned and began to go away. Come out of the fluttering, she could not at once recall what had passed between her and this little man.

Japhra put a quick hand on her arm: "Mistress, beware lest thou betrayest him!"

She remembered that.

CHAPTER VIII

A COLD 'UN FOR EGBERT HUNT. ROUGH 'UNS FOR PERCIVAL

I

IMA'S nursing, as that doctor had said, brought Percival back from where he had been driven beyond the mark by stress of events and put him firmly afoot along the road of convalescence. Only one circumstance arose to distress those days of his returning strength — the news of Egbert Hunt.

The assizes at Salisbury followed quick on the capture of the fugitive — run to earth in a wood by the Blue Boys and the tough boys and brought back like some wild creature trapped — soaked, soiled, bruised, faint, furious, terrified and struggling, for prompt committal by the magistrate.

A newspaper reporter at the assizes wrote of him as having again that appearance of some wild creature trapped when he stood in the dock before the Judge. The case attracted considerable local interest. There was first the fact that famous Boss Maddox had narrowly escaped death at the prisoner's hand: there was second the appearance of a noble lady of the county — Lady Burdon — as witness for the defence.

Gossips who attended the trial said it was precious little good she did the fellow. His conviction was a foregone conclusion. A solicitor with an eye to possibilities who attended Hunt during the police court proceedings learnt from him that he had been in Lady Burdon's service from boyhood and (in his own phrase)

promptly "touched her" to see if she would undertake the expenses of a defence. Her reply was in a form to send him pretty sharply about his business and (a man of some humour) he thanked her courteously by having her subpœaned on the prisoner's behalf — mitigation of sentence was to be earned by her testimony to the young man's irreproachable character during his long years in her service.

It was little of such testimony she gave. Angry at the trick played on her (as she considered it), angry at being dragged into a case of sordid aspect and of local sensation, she went angrier yet into the witness-box for the scene made at her expense by the prisoner as she passed the dock. The newspaper reporter who described him as presenting the appearance of a wild animal trapped, wrote of him as having a wolfish air as he glared about him — of his jaws that worked ceaselessly, of his blinking eyelids, and of the perspiration that streamed like raindrops down his face. As Lady Burdon passed him the emotions of the public were thrilled to see his arms come suppliant over the dock rail and to hear him scream to her: "Say a word for me, me lady !. Say a good word for me ! Love o' God, say —" A warder's rough hand jerked his cry out of utterance, and he listened to her during her evidence, watching her with that wolfish air of his and with those jaws ceaselessly at work.

A cold 'un, the gossips said of her when she stepped down. The Judge in passing his stereotyped form of sentence made more seemly reference to her testimony.

"The evidence," the judge addressed the prisoner, "of your former employer — come here reluctantly but with the best will in the world (as she has told us) to befriend you — has only been able to show that you have exhibited from your boyhood upward the traits —

sullenness of temper, hatred of authority — that have led you directly to the place where now you stand. It has been made very clear that this crime — only by the mercy of God prevented from taking a more serious form — was wilful, premeditated, of a sort into which your whole character shows you might have been expected to burst at almost any period of your maturer years. You will be sent away now where you will have leisure, as I sincerely trust, to reflect and to repent. . . . Five years. . . . You will go to penal servitude for that term."

Most wolfishly the wolfish eyes watched the judge while these words were spoken; quicker the working jaws moved, lower the poor form crouched as nearer the sentence came. As a vicious dog trembles and threatens in every hair at the stick upraised to strike, so, by every aspect of his mien, Egbert Hunt trembled and threatened as the ultimate words approached. "Penal servitude for that term" — as the dog yelps and springs so he screamed and sprung: a dreadful wordless scream, a savage spring against the dock, arms outflung.

Warders closed about him; but he was at his full height, arms and wolfish face directed at Lady Burdon. "You done it on me!" he screamed. "You might ha' saved me! You — ! You — cruel — ! I'll do it back on yer! Wait till I'm out! I'll come straight for yer, you an' your — son! I'll do it on —"

A warder's hand came across his mouth. He bit through to the bone and had his head free before they could remove him. "I've never had a fair chance, not with you, you — Tyrangs! — tyrangs all of yer! — tyrangs! You're the worst! God help yer when I come for yer! Tyrangs! . . . Tyrangs! . . ."

They carried him away.

II

"Oh, five years! — Five years!" Percival cried when he read the news. "Poor, poor old Hunt! Five years!"

He was sitting comfortably propped in a big chair in the garden behind "Post Offic," Aunt Maggie and Ima with him, and his weakness could not restrain the moisture that came to his eyes. "Five years, Aunt Maggie! He was one of my friends. I liked him — always liked him. He was always fond of me — jolly good to me. When I think of him with his vegules and his sick yedaches! Five years — poor old Hunt!"

He was very visibly distressed. "Everybody is fond of you, dear," Aunt Maggie said sympathetically.

"That's just it!" he said — "that's just it!" and he threw himself back in his chair and went into thoughts that were come upon him and that her words exactly suited: thoughts that were often his in the days of his sickness when he lay — was it waking or sleeping? he never quite knew. They presented the cheery group of all his friends, all so jolly, jolly good to him. Himself in their midst and they all smiling at him and stretching jolly hands. But a gap in the circle — Mr. Amber's place. Another gap now — Hunt. It appeared to him in those feverish hours — and now again with new reason and new force — that outside that jolly circle of friends there prowled, as a savage beast about a camp-fire, some dark and evil menace that reached cruel hands to snatch a member to itself and through the gap threatened him. Within the circle the happy, happy time; beyond it some other thing. Life was not always youth, then? not always ardour of doing, fighting, laughing, loving? Menace lurked beyond. . . . What? . . .

But those thoughts were swept away, and fate of poor

old Hunt that had caused them temporarily forgotten, by footsteps that brought up the path three figures, of whom two were colossal of girth and bright red of face — one striking at his thigh as if his hand held an imaginary stick — and one that walked behind them lean and brown, with rare bright eyes in a face of many little lines.

"Why, Mr. Hannaford! Mr. Hannaford!" Percival cried delightedly. "Stingo! Good old Japhra! — you've actually brought them!"

They were actually brought; but in the alarming company of women folk — of Aunt Maggie, of Ima, and of Honor, who now, the visit having been expected, came out with a laden tea-table — the tremendous brothers exhibited themselves in a state of embarrassment that appeared to make it highly improbable that they would remain. First having shaken hands all round the circle, colliding heavily with one another before each, Mr. Hannaford declaring to each in turn "Warm — warm — bless my eighteen stun proper if it ain't!" and Stingo repeating some husky throatings of identical sound but no articulation; they then shook hands with one another; then proceeded round the circle again; simultaneously appeared to discover their mistake; collided with shocking violence; and finally relapsed into enormous nose-blowings, trumpeting one against the other, as it seemed, into handkerchiefs of the size of small towels.

It was to abate this tremendous clamour that Aunt Maggie handed a cup of tea to Mr. Hannaford, and it was without the remotest desire in the world to have it there that Mr. Hannaford in some extraordinary way found it on the side of his right hand and proceeded to go through an involved series of really admirable juggling feats with it, beginning with the cup and saucer and ending with the spoon alone, that came to a grand finale

in cup, saucer and spoon shooting separately and at tolerable intervals in three different and considerable directions. It was to cover the amazement of the tremendous brothers at this extraordinary incident that Ima handed a piece of cake to Stingo, and it was the fact that Stingo had no sooner conveyed it to his mouth than he abandoned himself to a paroxysm of choking and for his relief was followed about the garden by Mr. Hannaford with positively stunning blows on the back that sent Percival at last from agonies of hopeless giggling to peals of laughter which established every one at their ease.

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!" from Percival. "I'm awfully sorry — I can't help it. Oh, Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Impossible to resist it: "Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho!" thundered Mr. Hannaford.

"Oh, Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!" shook Percival, rolling on his pillows.

"He! He! He! He! He!" came Stingo, infection of mirth vanquishing the contrariness of the cake-crumb.

"Proper good joke!" bellowed Mr. Hannaford, not at all sure what the joke was, but carried away by Percival's ringing mirth. "Proper good joke! Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho!"; and was chorused in gentler key by Japhra — for once — by Aunt Maggie and by Ima.

"He! He! He! He! He! Looks as well as ever he did!" choked Stingo, catching his brother's eye and nodding towards the invalid's chair; and that as masterfully turned the laughter to practical use as the laughter itself had turned dreadful embarrassment into universal joviality. It was the chance for Mr. Hannaford to cry delightedly: "Why, that's just what I was athinking,

bless my eighteen stun proper if it isn't!" the chance for the tremendous brothers to overwhelm Percival with the affection and the joy at his recovery with which they had come bursting; the beginning of highest good fellowship all round, of stupendous teas on the part of the tremendous brothers, and at last of explanation of the real project they had made this visit in order to discharge.

It took a very long time in the telling. On the part of Stingo there was first a detailed account (punctuated by much affectionately fraternal handshaking) of how he positively had settled down at last — sold out of the show trade after and on account of the events in which Percival and Japhra had shared, and henceforward was devoting his entire energies to the cultivation of the little 'orse farm. There was then from Mr. Hannaford, helped by a ledger that could have been carried in no pocket but his, a description of the flourishing state at which the little 'orse farm had arrived — "Orders for gentlefolks' little carts' little 'orses apourin' in quicker'n ever we can apour 'em out" — and in which it was monthly advancing more and more; and there was finally a prolonged discussion in fierce whispers between the brothers, interspersed with loud "Don't forget that's" and "Recollect for to tell him this's."

Then Mr. Hannaford turned to Percival, struck his thigh a terrible crack with his ledger, and in a very demanding tone said, "Well, now!"

"Well, I'm awfully — awfully glad," said Percival. "It's splendid — splendid. By Jove, it really is a big thing. But what? — but what —?"

"What of it is," said Mr. Hannaford very solemnly, "that what we want and the errand for what we've come is — we want you!" He turned to Stingo: "Now your bit."

"What of it is," responded Stingo with the huskiness of a lesson learnt by heart and to be repeated very carefully — "What of it is, he's wanted you, told me so, ever since you come over long ago with his late lordship and showed what a regular little pocket marvel you was, but didn't like for to have you until I'd settled down and taken my proper place and given my consent — which I have done and which I do, never having set eyes on your like and never wanting to. Now your bit."

"What of it is," said Mr. Hannaford, bringing himself to the point of these remarkable proceedings with a thigh-and-ledger-thump of astounding violence — "what of it is, we're Rough 'Uns, Stingo an' me. All right to be Rough 'Uns when it's only little circus 'orses and circus folk you're dealing with — no good being Rough 'Uns when it's gentlefolks' little carts' little 'orses, gentlefolks' little riding little 'orses, and gentlefolks' little polo little 'orses. Want a gentleman for to deal with the gentlefolk and a gentleman for to break and ride and show for the gentlefolk. Want you — an' always have wanted you, bless my eighteen stun proper if we ain't." (Thump !)

Percival was white and then red as the meaning of all the mysterious conduct of the tremendous brothers' errand was thus made clear to him — white and then red and with moisture of weakness in his eyes: why was everybody so jolly, jolly good to him?

"Why, Mr. Hannaford — Stingo —" he began.

But the tremendous brothers raised simultaneous shoulder-of-mutton fists to stop him, and fell into hurried preparations for departure. It was disappointment they feared. "Don't speak hasty!" Mr. Hannaford thundered. "Think over it — don't say a word — keep the ledger — proper good business in it — pay you what you like — make you a partner in it — set you up for

life properly to rights." He wrung Aunt Maggie's hand. "Say a word for us, Mam! loved him more'n a son ever since —"; in great emotion backed down the path taking Japhra with him; and in tremendous excitement returned to wring the hand of Stingo who, after opening and shutting his mouth several times without sound, at length produced: "Set you up for life properly to rights — more'n that, too. You're young. We're bound to pop off one day. No one to leave nothing to. Rough 'Uns. You're young. Bound to go to you in the end. Rough 'Uns —"

"O' course! O' course! O' course!" joined Mr. Hannaford, wringing Stingo's hand in ecstasy and wringing it still as he led him down the path. "O' course! That was a good bit. Never thought of it. Bound to pop off! Bound to go to him!"

III

"Tears in your eyes, Percival," Ima said, smiling at him as immense trumpetings at the gate announced the Rough 'Uns' departure in a din of emotional nose-blowing.

"Well, dash it all, there always are, nowadays," Percival laughed. "Everybody's so jolly, jolly good to me."

He lay back with new and most wonderful visions before his eyes; set his gaze on the dear, familiar line of distant Plowman's Ridge and peopled it with the scenes of his new and wonderful prospects. His hand in his pocket closed about letters received from Dora between that night at Baxter's and the night of the fight. Black and impossible his outlook then; limitless of opportunity now. Set up for life properly to rights! by

a miracle, nay, by a chain of tricks and chances — and he ran through the amazing sequence of them — he suddenly was that! Dora no longer immeasurably beyond him; Snow-White-and-Rose-Red possible to be claimed.

Aunt Maggie broke into his thoughts. "Are you glad, dear — about the Hannafords?"

"Glad! Aunt Maggie, I was just thinking I seem to be a sort of — sort of *thing* for other people's plans. Old Japhra planned a fighter of me and, my goodness! I had a dose of it. Here's old Hannaford always been planning to have me with him, and here I am going sure enough!" He laughed at an almost forgotten recollection. "Why, even you — even you had a wonderful plan for me. Don't you remember? I say, it's in hot company, your plan, Aunt Maggie. All come out right except yours. You'll have to hurry up!"

"Mine will come out right," she said.

CHAPTER IX

ONE COMES OVER THE RIDGE

I

"MINE will come out right." But Percival's twenty-first birthday, that was to have seen the consummation of Aunt Maggie's plan, came—and Aunt Maggie held her hand and let it go.

A double reason commanded her. Percival's coming of age arrived with the Old Manor closed and Rollo and his mother far afield on that two years' travel which Lady Burdon had long before projected for her son to introduce his "settling-down." It were an empty revenge, Aunt Maggie thought, that could be taken in such case; robbed of its sting, sapped of all its meaning, unless it were delivered to Lady Burdon face to face, as face to face with Audrey she had struck Audrey down.

That was one reason that found Percival's twenty-first birthday gone, and still the blow not struck. The other was in tribute to the fate that had carried forward Aunt Maggie's plan through many hilly places and that, fatalistic, she dared not hasten when the promised land drew into sight. When she heard during the three months of Percival's zestful life on the little horse farm leading to his birthday that Rollo, before that birthday dawned, would be shipped and away on his leisurely journey round the world, she was at first strongly tempted to make end of her long waiting; at last to Audrey's murderer send Audrey's son. Her super-

stitious reliance on fate prevented her. With fate she had worked hand in hand through these long years. Vengeance had been nothing had she taken it at the outset when Audrey lay cold and still in the room in the Holloway Road. Under fate's guidance it was become a vengeance now indeed — Lady Burdon twenty years secured in her comfortable possessions; her husband by fate removed, and the blow to be struck through her cherished son; a friendship by fate designed suddenly to turn against her and drive her forth as she had driven Audrey. Fate in it all, in each moment and each measure of it, and Aunt Maggie had the fear that now to dismiss fate and anticipate the hour that she and fate had chosen would be to risk by fate's aid being dismissed.

Fate gave her hint of it — gave her warning. She was in one moment being told by Percival of Rollo's intended departure and long absence; and seeing herself robbed, her plan for his twenty-first birthday defeated, was urging herself with "Now — now. No need to wait longer — now;" she was in the next hearing Percival's desolation at the thought of losing "old Rollo" for so long — of their plans for closest companionship during the few weeks that remained to them; and hearing it, was warned by the same question she once before had asked herself and dared not finish, much less answer then, and dared not finish now: "What, when I tell him, if —"

Fate in it. Fate warning her, Aunt Maggie thought. Fate threatening her. Fate had been so real, so living a thing to her, its hand so plain a hundred times, that she had come to envisage it as a personality, an actuality — a grim and stern and all-powerful companion who companioned her on her way and who now stooped to her ear and told her: "Go your own way — if you dare.

Seek to take your revenge now without my aid and short of the time that you and I have planned — if you dare. Abandon me and tell him now." Then the threat: "What, when you tell him, if —"

"Strange-like"? "Touched-like"? Thus, at least, she held her hand, paying tribute to fate; thus when the birthday came, and Rollo and Lady Burdon across the sea, and empty her vengeance made to seem if she then took it, she turned to fate and asked of fate "What now?"

"Strange-like"? "Touched-like"? Again to her ear that strong companion stooped — not threatening now; encouraging, supporting. . . .

"Why, Aunt Maggie," Percival cried, "you do look well — fit, this morning. Fifty times as bright as you've been looking these past days. Younger, I swear!"

"Well, it is your birthday, dearest," she told him.

"All very well! But every time we've mentioned my birthday, my twenty-first — even last night — you've been — I've thought it has made you sad, as if you didn't want me to have it! — growing too old, or something!"

For answer she only shook her head and smiled at him. But her reason for the stronger air he noticed in her, for her rescue from her depression of the days that led to his birthday, was that to her question of "What now?" she was somehow assured that she had but to wait, but to have a little more patience, and her opportunity would come. Fate was shaping it for her; fate in due time would present it. . . .

II

Percival for his own part was also in some dealing with fate in these days. As one that is forever feasting his eyes on a prized and newly won possession, the more

fully to realise it and enjoy it, so frequently in these days he was telling himself "I'm the happiest and luckiest beggar in the world!" and was marvelling at the train of tricks and chances by which fate — luck as he called it — had brought him to this happy, lucky period.

Every human life falls into periods reckoned and divided not by years but by events. Sometimes these events are recognised as milestones immediately they fall; a death, a birth, a marriage, a new employment, a journey, a sickness — we know at once that a new phase is begun, we take a new lease of interest in life; not necessarily a better or a brighter lease, a worse, maybe — but new and recognised as different. More frequently the milestone is not perceived as such until we look back along the road, see the event clearly upstanding and realise that we were one man as we approached it and have become another since we left it behind; again not necessarily a better or a happier man — a worse, maybe; and maybe one that often cries with outstretched arms to resume again that former figure. It cannot be. Life goes forward, and we, once started, like draughtsmen on a board, may not move back. Beside each event that marks a milestone we leave a self as the serpent sheds a skin — all dead; some better dead; some we would give all, all to bring again to life. It may not be.

Percival in these happy, happy months as right-hand man to the Rough 'Uns on the famously prospering little horse farm often told himself that his life had been — as he expressed it — in three absolutely different periods. He found a wonderful pleasure in dividing them off and reviewing them. Daily, and often more than once in a day, when he had a pony out at exercise, he would pull up on the summit of rising ground and release his thoughts to wander over those periods as his eyes

reviewed from point to point the landscape stretched beneath him; his mind aglow with what it tasted just as his body glowed from his exercise of schooling the pony in the saddle. Three periods, as he would tell himself. The first had ended with that night when he came to Dora in the drive. Everything was different after that. Then all his life with Japhra and with Ima in the van — the tough, hard, good life that ended with the fight. The third — he now was in the third! Two had been lived and left, and in review had for their chief burthen the picture of how, as he had said during his convalescence, every one had been so jolly, jolly good to him. Two had been lived and had shaped him — "a sort of *thing* for other people's plans"; and what kind plans! and what dear planners! and he, of their fondness, how happy a thing! — to this third period that sung to him in every hour and that went mistily into the future whose mists were rosy, rosy, rose-red and snow-white, Snow-White-and-Rose-Red. . . .

III

In the first few months, before Rollo and Lady Burdon took their departure for the two years' travel, he was daily, in the intervals from his work, with "old Rollo"; Dora often with them. Nothing would satisfy Rollo for the few weeks that lay between Percival's beginning of his duties with the Hannafords and his own start for the foreign tour but that they must be spent at Burdon Old Manor, nothing would please him to fill in those days but to pass them in Percival's company. He made no concealment of his affection for his friend. Men not commonly declare to one another the liking or the deeper feeling they may mutually entertain. The habit belongs

to women, and that it was indulged by Rollo was mark in him of the woman element that is to be observed in some men. It is altogether a different quality from effeminacy, this woman element. Sex is a chemical compound, as one might say, and often are to be met men on the one hand and women on the other in whom one might believe the male or female form that has precipitated came very nearly on the opposite side of the division — women who are attracted by women and to whom women are attracted; and men, manly enough but curiously unmannish, who are noticeably sensible to strongly male qualities and who arouse something of a brotherly affection in men in whom the male attributes ring sharp and clear as a touch on true bell.

There were thrown together in Rollo and Percival very notable examples of these hazards in nature's crucibles. The complete and most successful male was precipitated in him of whom Japhra had said long days before: "I know the fighting type. Mark me when the years come. A fighter thou." Qualities of woman were alloyed in him who once had cried: "Men don't talk about these things, Percival, so I've never told you all you are to me — but it's a fact that I'm never really happy except when I'm with you." Strongly their natures therefore cleaved, devotedly and with a clinging fondness on the weaker part; on the bolder, protectively and with the tenderness that comes responsive from knowledge of the other's dependence.

"Men don't talk about these things — but I'm never really happy except when I'm with you." That diffidence at sentiment and that self-exposure despite it, made when Percival, off to join Japhra, seemed to be passing out of his life, were repeated fondly and many times by Rollo now that Percival looked to be back in his

life again. "Hearing me talk like this," he told Percival, "it makes you rather squirm, I expect — the sort of chap you are. But I can't help it and I don't care," and he laughed — "the sort of chap I am. You don't know — you can't come near guessing, old man, what it means to me to think you've chucked all that mad gipsy life of yours that might have ended in anything, the rummy thing it was, and that kept you utterly away from me; to think you've chucked all that and are settled down in a business that really is a good thing, every one says it is, and any one can see it. It means to me — well, I can't tell you what, you'd only laugh. But I can tell you this much, that I do nothing but think, and all the time I'm away shall be thinking, of how we'll both be down here always now when I get back, and of all the things we'll do together."

They were riding as he spoke, their horses at a walk up the steady climb of the down to Plowman's Ridge from Market Roding. His voice on his last sentence had taken an eager, impulsive note, and as though he had a sudden suspicion that it was betraying an undue degree of sentiment he stopped abruptly, his face a trifle red. It was his confusion, not any excess of sentiment, that Percival — quick as of old in sympathy with another's feelings — noticed. He edged his horse nearer Rollo's and touched Rollo with his whip. "Yes, we're going to have a great, great time, aren't we?" he said. "I'm only just beginning to realise it — great, Rollo!"

The affectionate touch and the responsive words caused Rollo to turn to him as abruptly as he had broken off. "I've planned it," Rollo said. "I'm forever planning it. When I get back — fit — I'm going to settle down here for good. I loathe all that, you know," and he jerked his head vaguely to where "all that" might lie,



and said, "London and that kind of thing. I'm going to take up things here. I've never had any interests so far. My rotten health, partly, and partly not getting on with people, and I've let everything drift along and let mother make all the programmes. That's how it's been ever since you went off. Now you're back again and I'm keen as anything. I'm going to work up all this property, going to get to know all the people intimately and help them with all sorts of schemes. Going to run my own show — you know what I mean, no agent or any one between me and the tenants and the land. And you're going to help me — that's the germ of it and the secret of it and the beginning and the end of it."

Percival laughed and said: "Help you! You won't want any help from me. I can see myself touching-my-hat-to-the-squire sort of thing as you go hustling about the country-side."

But Rollo was too serious for banter. "You know what I mean," he said. "And you — you're going to be a big man in these parts, as they say, the way you're going, before very long."

They had gained the Ridge and by common consent of their horses were halted on the summit. Rollo turned in his saddle and pointed below them. "Percival, that's what I mean," he said, and carried his whip from end to end along the Burdon hamlets. "That's what I think of. Look how peaceful and remote it all looks, shut away from everything by the Ridge. We two together down there, planning and doing and living —"

Percival's gaze had travelled on from Burdon Old Manor where the whip had taken it and over the Ridge into the eastward vale. He turned again to Rollo, recalled by the stopping of his voice; and Rollo saw his strong face bright and said: "You'll think me a frightful

ass, you'll think me a girl, but you know I get quite 'tingly' when I anticipate it all. And not want your help! — Why, only look at that for instance," and he laughed and put his hand against Percival's where it lay before his saddle. The delicate white, the veins showing, against the strong brown fist was illustration enough of his meaning. "And you're not long out of an illness that would have outed me in two days," he said.

He saw the bright look he had observed shade, as it were, to one very earnest. The symbol of their two hands so strongly different quickened in Percival the appeal that he always felt in Rollo's company, that went back to the early years of their play together, that was vital part of this happy, lucky period, and that was warmed again in the thoughts that came to him as he had looked over the eastward valley. "Why, Rollo," he said earnestly, "it is good to think of. It is going to be good. We two down there. It's wonderful to me how it's all come out. It makes me 'tingly,' too, when I think of it — and of what it's going to be. Help you — why, we two —" He pressed the brown fist about the delicate hand. "There! — just like this good old Plowman's Ridge that shuts us off from everybody! Nothing comes past that to interfere with us."

They were a moment silent, each in his different way occupied by this close exchange of their friendship; and Rollo's way made him almost at once put his horse about, concerned lest his face should betray his feelings, and made him say with an attempt at lightness: "No, nothing, with the good old Ridge to shut us off," and then, "Is that some one riding up from Upabbot?"

The direction was that where Percival's gaze had been. "Yes, it is," Percival said. "I thought so. She's coming up. 'T's Dora."



CHAPTER X

TWO RIDE TOGETHER

I

OFTEN in these weeks the three rode together; seldom Percival and Dora met out of Rollo's company. Brief moments while they waited him, brief moments when he rode ahead of them, these were the most frequent of their intimacies; more rarely came chance half-hours, and most rare of all half-hours planned when she admitted they could be contrived. He suffered nothing that their meetings should be thus fugitive and at caprice, in main, of Rollo's moods and movements. That none as yet should know their secret ministered to rather than chafed his ardour; that, when their eyes met, their eyes spoke what in all the world only they two knew, was of itself as darling a thing as when to all the world she should be known for his alone. Then she would be his own, but their secret the price of it; now he might not claim her, but ah, their secret, theirs!

So secret it was, and she so much her rare and chaste and frozen self, that even between them it was hardly spoken. He never had lost his first awe and wonder at her beauty; and it filmed all his intercourse with her and all his thoughts of her as with a gossamer veil that, forbidding rough movements, forbade him touch her with the close words of his passion that might bruise her or give her alarm. More by signs than ever by

words they spoke their secret. Words carried them over the passing subjects that any might discuss; signs revealed the secret that was theirs alone. When they met the faintest deepening of her colour shades would show it, when they parted came a last glance and again those shades would glow; when he sometimes touched her hand, her hand would stay and speak it; when he sometimes held her eyes, ah, then their secret stirred! In those few half-hours when alone they came together, meeting near the Abbey, riding through the lanes, then with none to see them he would hold her hand and feel it tell him of their secret while their lips told empty words.

It was in these weeks, indeed, that he came to know he found it a little hard to make conversation with her. That something of her character was manifested in this difficulty he had no suspicion, nor that in his solution of it her disposition was clearer yet revealed. He found she was not greatly interested to hear of himself; then found her most alert, and oftenest brought the little laugh he loved to hear, the deepening he loved to see of those strange shades of colour on her cheeks, by speaking to her of herself, or listening while of herself she told him. At first he gave her glimpses of the van life with Japhra on the road; her curiosity was not aroused. Something of the famous fight he told her, and in vigorous passages of when the sticks came out, and of the wild scenes that followed the crime of poor old Hunt, whom she had known: he saw she was not greatly entertained. Later, as events ran along, he gave them to her — told her of the day when it was found that his increasing activities with the dear old Rough 'Uns made it necessary he should live over there, no longer ride daily to and fro from "Post Offic," and of

how jolly, jolly good they were to him and of the funny evenings in their company; told her of the day when the Rough 'Uns had announced they thought it proper to advancement of their business that a couple of hunters should be bought for him so that he might ride to hounds and keep among the horsey folk when the hunting season opened; told her of the day when he had from Aunt Maggie the news that the affection between herself and Ima had arranged that Ima was coming to spend the approaching winter — and likely every winter — with her; all these he brought to Dora, but slowly came to see they but little took her interest.

The discovery no more gave him suspicion that she was at fault in sympathy than of itself it vexed him, as one commonly might be vexed in such a case. It was himself he blamed when, recalling how he had talked and how little had been her response, he feared that he had tired her by his enthusiasms or, as reproaching himself he termed them, his meanderings. Clumsy he called himself, inept, dull-witted; and pictured her, his darling and his goddess, his frozen, rarest, perfect Snow-White-and-Rose-Red, and hated to have blundered all his dulness on so rare and exquisite a thing. Glad, then, the finding that he could entertain her by exercise of what a thousand-fold entranced himself — by encouraging her to speak of herself, her doings, her reflections, just as in the drive in that hour when first he knew he loved her she had spoken of her school. Lightest and most prattling what she told, and light and very passing what she thought; but spoken in her quaintly precise mode of speech and in her cold, high tone, and bringing from her her cold little laugh, and on her cold white cheek lighting those flames of colour. When he watched her with others he saw her perfect face set in its

strangely still, aloof expression; when she spoke with him, and spoke of herself, he was content only to listen so he might see it light and sometimes see their secret make it flame.

More than once while she so spoke and he so listened, "But I told you that," she would say; "I perfectly recollect telling you."

And he: "Well, tell me again;" and at the note of his voice she would seem to catch her breath as though some sharpness checked her breathing, and he would see their secret flutter in her eyes and see it stain its signal like a red rose on her cheeks.

II

It was by one definite step — not observed as such by him at the time nor any significance in it apprehended — that they passed from this stage of reserve on the matter between them and came towards its open entertainment. The afternoon following Rollo's departure with Lady Burdon on the long foreign tour marked the event, and Percival, meeting Dora by chance, was in some loss of spirits at the fact. He found her in very different case. Her mood was high. She had the air of one who has made a success or who has escaped some shadowing mischief. He could suppose no cause for such a thing or he would have said her bearing signified relief, removal of some oppression, freedom from some weight that had burdened her mind and that now, displaced, suffered her mind to run up, made her tread lighter.

"There's something different about you to-day," he told her; then, while she laughed, and while he caught more glee than commonly he knew in the little sound he loved to hear, found the exact expression for the change

he saw, and named the new step in their relations — "You are as if you'd suddenly got a holiday."

"Well, it is true that I somehow feel like that," she declared, "though why I should, I am sure I cannot imagine."

Yet dimly she knew, dimly in these later days had felt closing about her the purpose of her training, and when Percival spoke of the two years — the "frightfully long time" — for which old Rollo was gone, knew it half unknowingly for the period of her holiday. Another, more freely schooled than she, had known it clearly, had questioned, revolved, examined the sudden lightness that was hers, had realised it came of freedom from constant reminder of an end that seemed to wait her, and had inquired of herself, Why then glad? — Is that end unwelcome?

It was not hers so to examine; or examining, so to realise; or realising, so to ask; nor asking, and being answered "Yes, unwelcome," to think to make resistance and crush the end before it came. Not hers whose schooling in her mother's hands had made for and had won the stifling of such processes of thought; not hers who was caparisoned and trained for certain purpose; not hers who had responded in faultless beauty and in cloistered mind. Hers, if she stretched her hands and on a sudden found that purpose walled about her, only to follow on between the walls, not to break through them; to glance at them or run them with her fingers and see them silk and proper to her life, not beat against them, find them steel behind the silk, cry "Trapped! Trapped!" and wildly beat for outlet. Hers, if she raised her eyes and saw her purposed end far down the narrow way, only to accept and move towards it, not to halt, doubt, fear; hers to glance, and know, and think it

meet and proper to her life, not start and shrink, cry "No! No! No!" and seek escape while yet escape might be.

So she was circumstanced; yet there remains, be restraint never so firmly chilled into the bones, the purely primeval instinct of delight in freedom; so she was trained, but scarcely yet had recognised purpose, walls, or end. She only, as she told Percival, "somehow felt" that she had holiday, and holiday her mood in the months that went. Why she felt so, she was sure, as she said, she could not imagine; but as the butterfly, content to live among the flowers of a hothouse and never know itself prisoner, will airily toss aloft through the open door yet scarcely think itself escaped, so, content to have remained, but gaily floating free, blithe and new her mood when now they met. Less frequent their meetings, the common excuse of Rollo being denied, but ah, more fond! Fewer their secret exchanges, but ah, more dear! Holiday her mood, and fluttering she came to him, and was swinging in his ardour from her prison to his heart; from his heart to her prison, swinging in his ardour, and had no more than glimpses — transient tremors — of her prison's walls.

III

He had her engaged in such a glimpse — a little fearfully suspicious that there were walls about her — on a day when they were hunting together. Mrs. Espart changed her earlier intention of returning to town in the Autumn after Rollo and his mother had left. To encourage her position in the country-side formed part of her own share of the plans for the young people that were to crystallise when the return was made to Burdon Old Manor, and she began to centre Abbey Royal in the social

round of the neighbourhood. Her daughter's betrothal to Lord Burdon, when it was done and announced, should thus, as she schemed, lose nothing that was possible to the stir it would make. She was able to use the local Hunt as a prominent part of these intentions, did not ride herself, but horsed Dora well, subscribed handsomely and was gladly taken up by the Master in her suggestion of a bi-monthly meet at the Abbey.

Thus it was after hounds that Percival and Dora were given best chance to meet. The Rough 'Uns' idea of mounting Percival for the field proved successful to them as happy to him; Dora, in pursuance of her mother's plans, had encouragement — and wanted none — rarely to miss a meet. Hounds had run far on that day when she was caught by Percival engaged in one of those transient glimpses of her state that sometimes in these days came to puzzle her. He threw her into it, and that at a moment most unlikely, for circumstances had it that she was uncomfortable and out of temper. A bold fox carried the few who could follow him — they two among them — to a point fifteen miles from the Abbey before hounds ran into him. It was late afternoon, rain falling, when Percival and Dora started to hack the long stretch home, and they were little advanced on the road, and she feeling the wet, when she pronounced her feelings by telling him petulantly: "You should not have made me come on. I would have turned back long ago."

But it had been a rare run, and he was beneath the vigour of it. "Come, it was a great run," he said. "It was worth it, Dora."

"Nothing is worth getting wet like this. You know how I hate getting wet."

She was much wetter, and would give him no words,

before a new trial necessitated that she should speak again. Her saddle was slipping, she said, and when he alighted and found the girths had loosened and then that she must get down: "No, I'll try it a little farther," she told him very vexedly. "We're nearly there now. To move is hateful. The wet is touching me right through."

She gave him no answer to his "I'm awfully sorry, Dora;" but presently said: "It's no good, I must get down, I suppose."

He looked up at her as he stood to help her from the saddle.

"You're angry, Dora?"

"Well, of course I am angry."

He acted upon an impulse that swept out her temper and put her to that transient glimpse that vaguely showed her vague misgivings. He had watched her as they rode in silence, watched the rain that swept against her face run down her face that was like marble in her chill and in her loss of temper. Cold as it her eyes that met his now, and he had a sudden impression of her — all marble, all frozen snow, his darling! — that seemed to embody all his every thought of her frozen beauty and frozen quality since first he knew her, and that taxed beyond his power the restraint that frozen quality ever had set upon him. Beyond his power! — and as he brought her down he not released her, almost roughly turned her to him; and with no word almost roughly clasped her to him; and with "Dora!" kissed her wet face and held her while startled she protested; and kissed again, again, again, again.

"No, I will not let you go! No, you have been cold to me! No, you shall not go! I have never kissed you since that once I kissed you. I will kiss you now. No, I will not let you go. I love you, love you, love you!"

She bent her face away. He felt her panting in his arms and pressed her to him; and with his hands could feel how wet she was, and with his body felt her warm against him through her soaking clothes; and passion of love broke from him in words, as passion of love he pressed upon her face.

"Turn your face to me, Dora. You shall. I have endured enough. Turn your face to me — your wet, cold, sweet face that I love. Give me your lips. Give me your lips. I will kiss your lips and you shall kiss me. Put your arms round me. Dora, put your arms round me. Now kiss me, kiss me — Ah! I love you, I love you — my darling, my beautiful, my Snow-White-and-Rose-Red. Keep your arms there, Dora, Dora, my Dora!"

His voice had run hoarse and broken in his passion; now, when obedient she gave him her lips, obedient clung to him — her will, her physical discomfort and her natural impassivity burnt up as in a flame by this sudden assault — deep his voice went and strong: —

"That is all done now — all those days when I have been afraid to touch my darling, afraid to tell her every hour, every moment, how I love her for fear of frightening her. You are in my arms, my darling, and I can feel my darling's heart, and those days can never come again. You shall remember when you see me how I have held you here. You shall remember how you lie in my arms and that they hold you strongly, strongly, and that it is your safe, safe place. Look up at me! Ah, ah, how beautiful you are — your eyes, your lips, your cold, sweet face with the rain all wet on it. Kiss me! Ah, Dora — we were meant to meet, meant to love."

She answered him more by the abandonment with which she lay in his arms than by the faltering sentences

in which she sometimes whispered while they stood there. She was whispering, "I never meant you should think I was afraid. Percival, I never meant you should think I did not want to speak about our love. Only —" when she shivered violently, and he chid himself for keeping her there, and for warmth's sake, he leading the horses, they walked the last mile to the Abbey. Ardently then he talked to her of future plans. He told her that late in the next year it was arranged he was to go out to the Argentine with some ponies. A big business was like to be established there, arising out of a sale to a South American syndicate, and he was to arrange it and to select and bring back ponies of a native strain for the development of a likely type. When he returned — "This is why I am telling you, darling," — the good old Rough 'Uns had declared he should formally be made partner in what had now become a great enterprise. "I shall claim you then, my darling. I shall be able to claim you then."

She surprised him — and, not aware of her reason, thrilled him — by halting suddenly and clasping his hands that had been holding hers. "Oh, don't leave me, Percival! Percival, don't go away!"

He kissed her adoringly. "Do you love me so?"

She clung to him and only said: "Don't leave me, Percival. Percival, you must not," and while he sought to soothe her plea — and still was thrilled to hear it — suddenly went into a tempest of weeping, changing his tender happiness to tenderest concern.

"Dora! Why, what is it? What is it, my darling? Tell me, tell me — ah, don't, don't cry, don't tremble like that."

She had not controlled herself to answer him when sound of wheels came down the road, lamps through the

gloom. She checked herself, and was at her horse's head when there drew up a carriage sent from the Abbey to meet her and bring her back in shelter from the rain. A groom took her horse and, standing by the door as she entered, prevented explanation she might have made — had she been able to explain.

IV

Had she been able — for the thing that caused her sudden tears and sudden plea was no more than a glimpse, one of those transient glimpses of the walls, of the purpose, of the end of her training; differing from other glimpses that sometimes came in that it caught her unstrung. If it flickered again in the weeks that followed, it little more disturbed her than sudden shadow across the garden disturbs the butterfly passing among the flowers; a flicker of misgiving, a vague disturbance — gone. The year's end took her away with her mother to town. Succeeding Autumn that brought them back started Percival to the Argentine.

"I just miss everybody by going by this boat," he told Aunt Maggie, sitting with her far into the night before his departure. "There's Ima coming to you to look after you till I get back and not coming till next week, so I just miss her; and old Japhra bringing her, so I miss seeing him too; and then" — he paused for the briefest moment — "there's Dora and her mother staying another fortnight abroad so I miss them; and old Rollo and Lady Burdon due next month — I miss them all. It's the rottenest luck."

"They'll all be here for you when you get back," Aunt Maggie said.

He paused again before he spoke. "Yes. That's

where my luck's going to be dead in. I could tell you something, Aunt Maggie," and he laughed. "But I won't — yet. My luck — look here, tell old Japhra this from me; tell him I'm coming back for — he'll understand — the Big Fight, and going to win it!"

CHAPTER XI

NEWS OF HUNT. NEWS OF ROLLO. NEWS OF DORA

I

THE great Argentine trip — an affair of so much consequence in its bearing on the development of pony-breeding as to attract the attention of the "Field" in a series of articles that spoke in highest terms of "Messrs. Hannafords' well-known establishment" and of "the far-reaching effects of their new enterprise" — occupied six months. Six weeks — or days — they seemed to Percival as they fled on the novelty and the busy interests that attended him while in South America. Six years he found them on the long voyage home in the steamer that brought him and the purchases from native stock of whose blood "the far-reaching effects" were to be produced; and twice and three times six years he declared to himself he seemed to have been away as, in the closing hours of an April afternoon, the train brought him in sight — at last! at last! — of homeland scenes, of Plowman's Ridge along the eastward sky.

Quite a little party was assembled on Great Letham platform to greet him. The Rough 'Uns had driven over in two separate carts — one that should carry him to Aunt Maggie and the other that should bear his luggage — and they were there, their faces to be seen afar like crimson lamps of their excitement, and Mr. Hannaford's leg-and-cane cracks rising high above the din of escaping steam in which the train drew up, and

Stingo almost completely voiceless with huskiness for more than an hour back. And Stingo had brought Japhra, arrived at the little horse farm to take up Ima after her winter with Aunt Maggie; and Mr. Hannaford had brought Ima, and they were there — Japhra with his tight mouth twitching, and deep in his puckered face his bright little eyes gleaming; and Ima, standing a shade apart, a tinge of colour crept beneath her skin, and on her lips and in her eyes her gentle smile. To complete the greeting there came shrill, ridiculous chuckles from a stout, soft gentleman, and from his sister little hops and little flutters and "*There* he is! He'll *hit* his head leaning out like that! He's *browner* than ever! Oh, *Percival!*"

And "Percival!" from them all in all their different keys, and he among them before the train was stopped, and turning from glad face to glad face, and caught up in the midst of it with a sudden wave of the old thought, like a knock at the heart, like a catch at the throat — "How jolly, jolly good they all are to me!"

Like a knock at the heart, like a catch at the throat, it took him, and checked him a moment in his responses to the congratulations and was mirrored in the flicker that went across his face. His eyes caught Japhra's and it was the look of understanding he read there, he thought, that brought Japhra to him for another word before he drove away. In the station yard the traps were waiting. "You, longside o' me — *partner!*" bellowed Mr. Hannaford and must shake Percival's hand again for the meaning of that word. "Up behind, Ima, my dear. We'll take *partner* home while Stingo leaves that box at the farm and then comes on with the rest of the luggage."

Plump Mr. Purdie and birdlike little Miss Purdie

had started to walk; Stingo was throating "Come along, Japhra, come along, Japhra," in a husky whisper that no one could hear but himself; Mr. Hannaford was beginning the tremendous operation of hoisting himself up on one side of the cart while Percival, a foot on the step, was about to swing himself up on the other, when Japhra turned and came back to him.

"Thy hand a last time, master!"

"Hullo, what's this for?" Percival laughed; but saw Japhra's face grave, and went on: "You caught my eye on the platform just now, Japhra. I saw you knew how I felt. That's it, eh?"

"Something of that," Japhra answered him. "Ay, a thought of that came to me then." The note of his voice was as earnest as his eyes, and he added, "Master, there was another matter to it that I saw."

"Well, you were always the thought-reader," said Percival, and smiled at him quizzically. "What was it, Japhra?"

"That thou art out for something else than we know."

"You could see that? Well, you shall know to-morrow."

The earnest look in Japhra's eyes went deeper. "Comes it so soon?"

"A few hours, Japhra."

There came an impatient hail from Mr. Hannaford, settled at last in the trap above them.

"Well, press my hand to it," Japhra said; and as he held Percival's hand, "press — let me feel thy grip, master. Something bids me to it. Ay, thou art strong. Be strong in thine hour."

As the trap swung out of the station yard Percival saw him still standing there as though he still would speed that message. He turned about in his seat to in-

clude Ima in his chatter with Mr. Hannaford, and they were not two miles upon the road before he was launched upon what gave him need for strength.

II

Strangers were rare in Great Letham. Every figure passed as they rattled through the town was familiar to Percival. The turn into the high road took them by one — a tall, straight man with something of a stiff air about him, as though his clothes were uncomfortable — that looked at them with a swift glance as they overtook him.

"Hullo," said Percival. "That's a new face. Who's that?"

"Why, that's a bit of news for you, *partner*," said Mr. Hannaford. "Bless my eighteen stun proper if it ain't. There's two or three o' them chaps about — 'tecs."

"'Tecs? — detectives? Why, what's up, Mr. Hannaford?"

"There's been an escape from Dartmoor prison. Three of 'em in a fog. And one — you'd never guess!"

"Not old Hunt?"

"Hunt sure enough, *partner*."

"Hunt — good lord, poor old Egbert Hunt! And those chaps? After him? Do they think he's here?"

"They didn't know what to think," said Mr. Hannaford, and with a laugh at them for their puzzlement went into explanation. A fortnight ago the escape was made, it appeared. Two caught — one shot — but Hunt still missing. Traces of him in four burglaries, and each one nearer this way, and now the 'tecs here on the belief that he was making for the country-side he knew.

Percival met Ima's eyes and saw in them sympathy with the feelings given him by this news. "I knew you would be sorry," she said.

"Sorry! — why, Ima, it's awful, it's dreadful to me to think of poor old Egbert like that. One of them shot — and he hiding, terrified, no shelter, no food. When they catch him — I know what he is. He'll be mad — do anything. They'll shoot him down, perhaps."

She touched his hand and he was moved to catch hers that touched him and saw the blood tide up into her face. He had seen much of her in the winter following his illness when she had lived with Aunt Maggie. They were brother and sister, he had told her in those days, and when he had spoken of that night on Bracken Down before the fight: "Oh, it is forgotten," she had told him. "Forgotten, and forgotten all the foolish words I spoke. Nothing in them, Percival. Yes, you are my brother. I am your sister. That is it."

And now was sister. He did not notice that she caught her breath when the blood came into her face as he took her hand, nor that she disengaged his clasp before she spoke. Only that in her gentle voice, "You must not let it upset you, Percival," she told him. "You are coming back so happy. You must not let this spoil it."

"But it does," he said. "It does. I can't enjoy myself — I can't be happy while he's near here perhaps — those brutes after him. We'll have to look out for him, Ima. You and I. He'll not be afraid of us. We'll go all round the place together. He'll come to us if he sees us."

"Yes — yes," she said, and seemed glad.

"What does old Rollo say?"

"Ah, Lord Burdon — Lord Burdon is longing to see you. Of Hunt I don't know what he says. But of you

— Percival, he's longing for you. He's not been very well. He's kept to the house. He sent word how he had looked forward to meeting you at the station but could not, and begged you would go up to him as soon as ever you arrived. You must."

"Why, of course I will," Percival said, and with recollection of Rollo — and of Rollo longing for him — was temporarily removed from the gloom that had beset him and returned to the anticipation of all that awaited him.

"I will, of course. He's not ill?"

"He's ever so much stronger since he came back. Only a cold that keeps him in. He has to keep well for the festivities, of course."

Her reference was to the great twenty-fourth birthday celebrations — the coming of age according to Burdon tradition — and Percival agreed eagerly. "Why, rather! He'll want all his voice for the speeches! I was afraid once I'd not get back in time. As it is, I've only just done it. The nineteenth, next week, his birthday, isn't it?"

"Next Thursday," Ima said, smiling to see him smile again.

"Touch and go!" laughed Percival. "I might easily have missed it." He turned to Mr. Hannaford. "Mr. Hannaford, you'll have to stay a bit when we get home — have tea — and then drive me over to the Manor. We're talking about Lord Burdon and the festivities. Great doings, eh?"

"Why, great doings is the word for it," said Mr. Hannaford. "Bless my eighteen stun proper if it ain't. Everybody invited a score o' miles round. Going to roast a nox whole, marquees in the grounds, poles with ribbons on 'em from the church to the Manor —"

"From the church! What, is there going to be a service?"

"Service!" said Mr. Hannaford. "Why, how's he going to be married without?"

Percival almost jumped to his feet. "Married! Is he going to be married?"

"What, don't you know, *partner?*"

"I've not had letters for months. *Married!* Good lord, old Rollo married! Why, that's tremendous. Ima, why ever didn't you tell me? Married! Whom to?"

Mr. Hannaford was enormously pleased at this excitement. "Give 'ee three guesses, *partner.*"

Percival cried: "Why, I couldn't guess in a thousand. It fairly knocks me. Old Rollo going to be married! Go on — tell me!"

"Go on — guess," said Mr. Hannaford.

"How can I guess? I don't know his London friends. I shan't even know her name."

"Well, you'll ha' left your memory where you left that string o' little 'orses if 'ee don't. Ever heard o' Upabbot?" He twisted round to wink advertisement of his humour to Ima. "Got any sort of a glimmering rec'lection of Abbey Royal? — why, Miss Espart!"

CHAPTER XII

PRELUDE TO THE BIG FIGHT

I

PERCIVAL said in a quiet voice, "Put me down. Put me down — I'm going to walk."

"So you're no hand at guessing, *partner*. Own up to that," was Mr. Hannaford's response. Then he cried, "Hi, what's up with 'ee? What be doing?" for Percival had stretched a sudden hand to the reins and the horse swerved sharply. "Whoa!" bellowed Mr. Hannaford, and dragged up with a wheel on the brink of a ditch. "Might ha' had us out!" he turned on Percival. "Bless my eighteen stun proper if 'ee mightn't!"

It was a wild face that fronted him, blotchy in red and white as it were freshly bruised. "Well, put me down!" Percival cried at him fiercely. "Put me down when I ask you!" and as he slowly drew the rug from his knees and put out a foot to the step he turned back on Mr. Hannaford and flamed "I suppose I can walk if I want to?" and dropped heavily to the road. His feet landed on the edge of the ditch. He blundered forward and came with hands and knees against the hedge. The stumble shook his hat from his head and he turned and went hatless past the tail of the cart and a few paces down the road.

Mr. Hannaford released with a rushing explosion the immense breath that he had been sustaining during the whole of these proceedings. He turned amazed eyes on Ima: "What's happened to him?"



She sprang to the road. "Percival!" and followed him.

He turned at the sound of her feet; and at the look on his face she stopped.

"Well?" he demanded. "Well? What is it now?"

"You have left your hat," she said. "I will bring it to you."

Some wit that came to her gave her these ordinary words in place of questioning him, and he came back to her quickly. "I don't want my hat," he told her. He looked up towards Mr. Hannaford. "I'm sorry I pulled you up like that. I want to walk, that's all. I'm going along the Ridge — to stretch my legs."

"There's something wrong with 'ee," said Mr. Hannaford. "What is it, boy?"

"Nothing. I want a walk, that's all."

Mr. Hannaford pointed across the Ridge. "There's a storm coming up. Best ride."

"I'll be home before that." He turned and went slowly towards a gate that gave to the fields approaching the downside. Ima hesitated and then went swiftly after him as he fumbled with the latch.

"Percival, I will walk with you."

He turned upon her a face from which the gentler mood was gone.

"Oh, for God's sake let me alone," he cried, and passed through the gate and left her.

II

He found that he kept stumbling as he pressed along.

He tried to give attention to lifting his feet but stumbled yet. He found that he could not think clearly. He tried to take a grasp of his thoughts and place them

where he would have them go, but they persisted in form of words that Mr. Hannaford had spoken, in swift gleams of pictures that answered the words and then round about the words again. "Ever heard o' Upabbot?" Ah, every well-remembered street of it arose before his mind! "Got any sort of a glimmering recollection of Abbey Royal?" Ah, he could scent the very flowers banked along the drive! "Why, Miss Espart." Blankness then — some thick oppressive darkness suddenly shutting down upon him; some bewildering, vaguely sinister blanket of dread that stifled thought — then suddenly out of it and back again to "Ever heard o' Upabbot?"

The ground beneath him flattened abruptly under his feet. He stumbled more violently than before, and was jolted to recognition that Plowman's Ridge was gained. Of long habit he straightened himself to meet the wind. It suited the unreal conditions that seemed to surround him, it was a part of the dream in which he seemed to be, that something that should have been here seemed to be missing. What? He stood a moment looking dully about him. The question merged into and was lost in the circle of thought that beset him as he followed his right hand and turned along the Ridge. He had stumbled a full mile and more when there struck his face that which informed him what had been missing when first he reached the crest. Wind came against him, and he realised there had been no wind where, ever and like an old friend, wind ran to greet him. Aroused, he pulled up short. He had come far. That was Little Letham lying beneath him, Burdon Old Manor in those trees. Late afternoon gave before evening down the valley. Heavy the wind and close. He turned his head and saw against the further sky great storm clouds

pressing down upon the Ridge. He raised his eyes and saw a figure come towards him, crossing the Ridge and walking fast from Little Letham, turning towards him as he gave a cry.

"Dora!"

He went forward some swift paces, the stumbling gone from his feet and his mind sprung tensely out of its dull circling; then he stopped. She too was halted. She had turned sharply about at his cry and was poised towards him where she turned. There were perhaps twenty yards between them, and the quickly deepening gloom admitted him her face whitely and without clear outline through the dusk. He did not move, nor she. There came from her to him a rattle of breeze, presage of the storm that gathered, and he saw her skirts fan out upon it. There struck his face a heavy raindrop, skirmishing before the gale, and he drew a quick breath and went forward to her — nearer, and saw her faultless face and felt the blood drum in his ears; nearer, and her clear voice came to him and he could hear his heart.

She said: "Percival!"

"Dora, I have come back."

Her face, that he watched with eyes whose burning he could feel, was as emotionless as motionless she fronted him. It might have been frozen, so still it was; and she a carven thing, so still she stood; and her eyes set jewels, so still were they. His breathing was to be heard as of one that breathes beneath a heavy load. When she did not answer — and when answered he knew himself by her silence — "There is only one thing I want to hear from you," he said. "Tell me it."

Her voice was a whisper. "Oh, must you ask me that already?"

He said stupidly: "But I have come back."

She said: "O Percival, it is a long time."

He had known her voice precise and cold — as icicles broken in a cold hand! — as was its habit and as he thrilled to hear it. He had known it faltering and atremble and scarcely to be heard when she was in his arms. Now there was a new note in it that he heard. There was a weary droop, as though she were tired. "But it is a long time," she said again. "I asked you not to leave me."

He was trembling. "Tell me what has happened."

Her reply was, "I asked you not to leave me, Percival."

"You and —" There was a name he had difficulty in saying. He turned away and went a step, fighting for it among the scenes in which her words surrounded it. Then came to her again and pronounced it. "You and Rollo. Is it true?"

"Yes, it is true."

He said brokenly: "But I have held you in my arms. How can it be true? I have kissed you and you have kissed me and clung to me. You have loved me. I have come back for you. How can it be true?"

Her face answered him. Beneath his words the crimson flamed as though in crimson blood it would burst upon her cheeks — flamed in those strange pools of colour where her colour lay, and drove her white as driven snow about them — flamed and called his own blood as flame bursts out of flame. He caught her in his arms. "You are mine! What has he done to you? Mine, mine, what has he dared?"

She struggled and pressed her face away from his that approached it. "You must not! You must not! Percival, you must not!"

"Ah, your voice, your voice tells me that you are mine!" he cried: and cried it again in revulsion of

triumph over the unthinkable torment that had possessed him. "Your voice tells me!" and again in savagery of heat at a thought of Rollo, "Mine—your voice tells me you are mine!"

The colour was gone from her face. She was so white and so still in his arms that he desisted the action of his face towards her, but held her close, close. There came from her lips: "No, no! you must not. It is wrong."

"How can it be wrong? You say No, but your voice tells me. I have come back for you, my Dora."

"Ah, be kind to me, Percival."

"How should I be unkind to my darling?"

He felt a tremor run through her. "You must not call me that, Percival. It should never have been. I thought you would forget."

What, had he not triumphed then? Torment came ravening back at him again like a wild thing, and with a sudden burst and clamour, shaking him where he stood, old friend wind with that old hail — or mock? — of ha! ha! ha! in his ears. He said intensely: "You thought I would forget? While I was away you thought I would forget? Dora, you never thought it!"

She stirred in his clasp to disengage herself: "No, no — before that. When we were together."

He broke out: "Explain! Explain!" He let her from his arms and she stood away from him, stress on her face. "Oh, there is something I do not understand in this," he cried. "Explain — tell me."

She told it him. "Percival, I was always to marry Rollo," she said.

He stared at her. "How can you mean — always?"

"I should have told you. I knew it."

He pronounced in a terrible voice "Rollo!" Then he said thickly: "What, when you were with me — in

those days, those days! You knew it? He had spoken to you then?"

She caught her hands to her bosom in an action of despair. "No, no!" she cried; and then, "Oh, how can I explain?" and then found the word that helped her with force of a thousand words to name her meaning. "It was — holiday," she said.

He remembered it. He remembered, and its memory came like a lamp to guide him. He said slowly, "When Rollo went — I remember you were different. Dora, do you mean it was always arranged you were to marry Rollo?"

She said, "Always — always!"

He cried, "But you loved me!"

She wrung her hands at that, and cried in the most pitiful way, "I thought you would forget. I don't know what I thought. It was holiday. It should not have been. Oh, why must we talk of it?"

"Dora, they are forcing you to marry him."

"I was always to, Percival. I was always to."

"You want to?"

"Well, I was always to."

Her voice was that of a child whose young intelligence by no means can take a lesson. Sufficient to one such that the thing is so as he sees it and cannot be otherwise; and to her sufficient — trained and schooled and cloistered for that sufficiency — that, as she said, she was always to. Ah, she had had holiday, but not enough to loose her; she had tossed among the flowers, but had fluttered home at nights. Now the mate she toyed with was knocking at her prison; she could see and could remember, but she could not fly. Quickly after the end of their months together, and very certainly after Rollo's return, she had discovered what long she had dimly

seen. Clearly the purpose and the walls and the end of her training had been presented to her. Passively she had accepted them.

But how explain it? How explain what herself she did not know? She looked from night that came stealing up the valley to his face that had a shade of night. She heard the wind that now was in gusty beat against them, and above the sound could hear his breathing. She could only wring her hands and say again: "Percival, I was always to;" and when he did not answer, "Let me go now, Percival."

He answered her then. "You loved me. How can you do this? You loved me. Why did you not tell me?"

She cried as if she were distracted, "Oh, oh! I asked you not to leave me. It was a long time. You were not here."

He caught on to that. "I am here now. It shall not be. Dora, I am here now!"

"It is done," she said. "It is done!"

He seemed for the first time to realise the complete abandonment, the unresisting resignation to her fate, that was in her every word and tone. His voice went very low.

"Dora, are you going to marry him?"

"I was always to." It was the beginning and the end of her will. "I was always to." She had no question of it.

He threw up his arms in wild despair at its repetition. "O my God! What a thing to tell me! What a thing to be! Why? Why? Do you love him? Is he anything to you? Why were you always to marry him?"

She gave the reason her mother had never concealed

from her. "He is Lord Burdon. It was arranged long ago. My mother —"

The sound he made stopped her. As if he had been stabbed and choked his life out on the blow, "Ah!" he cried. "That is it. Because he is what he is. If he were like me this would never have happened. If he were not what he is it would be ended."

She appealed "Percival! Percival!" wrung her hands and turned and went a step. When she looked again she saw his face as none had ever seen it, twisted in pain and dark with worse than pain. He was not looking at her, but down upon Little Letham where Burdon Old Manor lay. She approached him and spoke his name, touched him, but he did not move.

She left him there and once looked back. He still stood as she had left him.



CHAPTER XIII

THE BIG FIGHT OPENS

I

THERE had been one years before that had cried, "You are Lord Burdon!" and one that had received it, first in light mock at its folly, then in bewilderment at its truth. There was one cried the same words at "Post Offic" on this night and one, groaning in torment of spirit, that put it aside as a jest untimely, then, convinced of it, got to his feet and heard as it were the world shattering to pieces in his ears.

The gathering storm had opened and was driving along the Ridge in its first onset of rain when at last Percival turned where Dora had left him, wrenched himself about as though his feet were rooted, and brought to Aunt Maggie the dark and working face that had stared down upon the Old Manor. Ima had told Aunt Maggie of his strange behaviour when he had stopped the cart. When he arrived she was up-stairs in her room, crying a little, wanting to be alone. Aunt Maggie, Ima's fears communicated to her, awaited him alone in the parlour. He opened the door fiercely and came in dripping from the streaming night. She gave a little cry at sight of his face and rose and stretched her hands towards him. The sudden peace in here, exchanged for the buffeting of the night, reacted on the tumult of his mind and forced him to discharge it.

"O Aunt Maggie! Aunt Maggie!" he said.

"My Percival! What is it?"

He took both her hands that were extended to him; then was acted upon anew by her loving eyes, and clasped her to him and she felt sobs shaking his strong frame.

"Percival! Percival! What has happened to you?"

He let her go and dropped into a chair against the table, put his hands to his head and while she saw his shoulders heaving she saw the raindrops running through his fingers from his hair. She went before him, and stretching her arms across the table encircled his wrists with her hands. They were burning to her touch. "Percival, it is torturing to me to see you like this. Tell me, tell me!"

He took her hands. "Oh, I am in torture," he said, and she saw the torture burning in his eyes. "Aunt Maggie, Aunt Maggie, I loved Dora. I never told you. I was to tell you to-night. I had come back for her."

She felt a sense go through her as of a sword turned within her.

"But Rollo!" she said.

His hands crushed hers so that she had pain. "Yes, Rollo!" he said. "I nearly went to him to-night. I shall go yet. Rollo! Rollo! Rollo!"

He ground the name between his teeth. The pressure of his hands on hers became almost insufferable. She felt it as nothing to what shook her brain. She was back at the bedside in the Holloway Road. She was spun through the years of her waiting, waiting. She was fronted with the torments when that for which she waited had seemed to be snatched from her. There filled the room and stooped towards her the figure that she envisaged as fate, that had stayed her hand, that she

obeyed, that had tried her, that had fought for her, that now was come to prove itself fate indeed.

In one part she was dizzy and overcome with the shaking at her brain; in the other she was listening to Percival and worse beset at every word. "I have seen her," he said, "I have seen her to-night. They are forcing her to this. They have arranged it for years — arranged it! Bought her and sold her because he is what he is. Aunt Maggie, she loved me for myself. He comes in! he comes in! he comes in! and takes her because he is Lord Burdon."

The shaking at her brain pitched suddenly to a tensest balance like a machine that rattles up to action then tunes to a level spinning.

"He is not Lord Burdon!" she said.

He was silent but he did not heed her.

"He is not Lord Burdon!"

At her repetition he moved quickly in his seat and relaxed his hands. "Oh, why say that? Why say that?"

"You are Lord Burdon!"

He let her hands go and pressed his own again to his head. "Can you only talk like that when you see me suffering?"

She rose to her feet. "Percival! Percival, listen to me. It is true. It is what I have kept for you these years. It is what I have meant when I told you I had something for you. You are Lord Burdon!"

He also stood. "Are you mad, Aunt Maggie? Are you mad?"

She staggered back against the wall. While he stared at her as he questioned her sanity, while she saw the look in his eyes as he asked her, there came to her with a shock of sudden fear, as to one that has released a wild and mighty thing and shudders to have done it, the

words Japhra had said: "Mistress, beware lest thou betrayest him!"

He came swiftly to her and roughly caught her. "Are you mad? What is this?"

She recovered herself. "Do you know that box in your room?"

The locked box was an old joke of his. "What has that to do with it?"

"The proofs are there. You shall see."

"Show me," he said, his voice not to be recognised for any he had spoken with. "Show me!"

She steadied herself against a chair, and steadying herself by all her hand came against as she walked, went across the room to the stairs, he following. There came at that moment a loud knock upon the outer door. He went dazedly to it and stared with unattending eyes at one who stood there, the light shining on his heavy waterproof coat that streamed with rain. It was the strange man whom they had overtaken as the cart came out of Great Letham.

"The convict Hunt's been seen near by," said the man abruptly. "Me and my mates thought it right to tell the village."

Percival closed the door upon him without a word. "Show me," he repeated to Aunt Maggie, and followed her to her room.

II

He sat on the edge of her bed while she told him his story. He sat motionless and with his face immobile. There was only one action that betrayed he was under any emotion. His chin was forward on his hand, elbow on knee. His fingers came across his mouth, and in the

knuckle of one he set his teeth. Blood was there when he drew his hand away.

She finished: "It is all here, letters, certificates. Your mother's letters, Percival, and your father's. They are all in order from the first. There is one here to his grandmother and one to his lawyer telling them of his marriage. He left those with her when he went away. Then the letters from India."

He drew his hand from his mouth, the blood on his fist. "Leave me alone," he said. "Go away, Aunt Maggie, and leave me to look at them alone."

There was that in his voice which smote terribly across her spinning brain and caused her to obey him.

III

An hour he was occupied in reading the yellowed sheets whose heritage he was; for long thereafter sat and stared upon them. These devoted lines in that round hand were his mother's: his father's those ardent passions in those bold characters; he their son. He felt himself a shameless listener to penetrate these tender secrets; he felt himself a little child that hears his parents' voices. Sometimes, in that first mood, the blood ran hotly to his cheeks; sometimes, in that second, there came sobs to his throat and great trembling. Memories of thoughts, impulses, happenings that had been strange, returned to him, crowding upon him; here was their meaning, t[illegible] interpretation here. In the library with Mr. Amber, "thinking without thinking as if I was in some one else who was thinking," shadows about the room and a moth thudding the window-pane — here the secret of it! In the library with Mr. Amber and the old man's cry: "Why do you stretch your hand so, my lord?" —

here the answer! In presence of death with Mr. Amber, and "Hold my hand, my lord" — here what had opened Mr. Amber's eyes. In dreams in Burdon House, and searching, searching, and all the rooms familiar, and a voice that had cried, "My son, my son! Oh, we have waited for you!" — here, here, the key to it — here that voice in those yellowed sheets — here, here, what he had searched, streaming from those papers, tingling his skin, filling his throat as though from the faded lines strong essences rushed and pressed about him. His mother! — he spoke the word aloud, "Mother!" His father! — "Father!" Their son, "I am your son! . . . "

Of a sudden he was returned to the present. Of a sudden he was snatched up from realisation of what had been, and what was, and pitched into battle of what was now to be. Out of a churchyard, out of a graveside where gentle thoughts arise, into the street, into the business where the din goes up! So he was hurled, and as one that gasps on sudden immersion in icy water, as one gripped in panic's hold that comes out of sleep to sudden peril, so, as he faced the thing that was come to him, he cried out hoarsely, knew horror upon him, and shut his eyes and pressed his hands against them as though his lids alone could not blind what picture was before him. In one instant fierce, fierce, exultant triumph; in the next torment that reeled him where he stood. In one instant himself that an hour before had stood looking balefully down upon Burdon Old Manor; that had cried to Aunt Maggie: "Rollo! Rollo! Rollo!" and knew it for a thrice-repeated curse; that had cried: "I was going to him! I shall go to him yet!" and knew his hands tingle and his brain leap at the thought; in the next, nay, immediate with the flash and flame of it, Rollo that from childhood's days had leant

upon him; that he had brothered, fathered, loved; that had cried to him — ah, God, God! how the words came back! — "Everything I've got is yours — you know that, don't you, old man?" That had cried, "I'm never really happy except when I'm with you;" that had said, "I want some one to look after me — the kind of chap I am; a shy ass and delicate."

He dropped on the bed in the tumult of his torment. He writhed to his knees and flung himself against the bed, his fingers twisting in the quilt, his face between his outstretched arms. He had burned with fury to face Rollo and crush him down. The weapon was in his hands. Ah, ah, too strong, too sharp, too cruel! New thoughts brought him to his feet. Strongly he arose and shook himself. What, was he weakening toward a sentiment? "Everything I've got is yours" — but Dora taken from him! "Everything I've got is yours!" — it was! it was! and Dora with it! Always arranged because he was Lord Burdon! His darling sold to Rollo and bought by Rollo because Rollo was what he was! And he was not it! He was not it! This night, this hour he should know it!

This night? There came to him the vision of Rollo he had had when they told him Rollo could not come to the station to meet him but begged he would go up to him directly he arrived. He had pictured old Rollo coming to him with eager, outstretched hands. Rollo was waiting for him now, expecting him every moment, would so come to him if he went, would so come to him if he waited till to-morrow; and how would look when he spoke and told? The years ran back and answered him. There came to him clearly as yesterday that first visit to Mr. Hannaford's when he had been flushed with excitement and praise at riding the little black horse and had

turned to see Rollo shrinking as he stood away, distress and tears working in his face. So he would look now. Then he had encouraged Rollo — as all through life thereafter he had heartened him. Now? Now he was to strike the appealing face that then and ever had looked to him for aid. . . .

How do it? How do it? Why hesitate? Why hesitate? How strike him? Why spare him? How break him? Why let him go? Like live wild things the questions came at him and tore him; as one in direst torment there broke from his lips "O God, my God!": as one pursued he burst from the room, through the parlour where Aunt Maggie stretched hands and cried to him, out into the night where tempest raged and blackness was — fierce as his own, black as the thoughts he sought to race.

Out, out, as one pursued! Away, away, to shake pursuit! And caught as he ran, screamed at as he stumbled on, by all the howling pack that gathered strength and fury as he fled. His feet took the Down; full the tempest struck him as he breasted it; ah, ah, more violent the furies fought within! Thunder broke sheer above him out of heaven with detonation like a thousand guns; he staggered at the immensity of it; on, on, for furious more what joined in shock of battle in his brain! A sword of lightning showed him the Ridge and seemed to shake it where it lay. He gained the crest and turned along it and knew in his ears old friend wind in howling mock of ha! ha! ha! to see this fruitless race.



CHAPTER XIV

ALWAYS VICTORY

I

He came over against Burdon Old Manor and stopped and knew himself where he had stood with Dora three hours before. His exertions had run him to the end of his physical strength. He sank to his knees, and there, like vultures swooping to their stricken prey, the torments he had raced from came at him in last assault; there had him writhing on the sodden ground. . . .

In their stress, as a hand put down to touch him where he writhed, a sudden recollection came — himself with Japhra by the van by Fir-Tree pool; Japhra with a lighted match cupped against his face and Japhra's words: "Listen to me, master. Listen to me — thy type runneth hot through life till at last it cometh to the big fight. Send me news of that. Send only 'The Big Fight, Japhra.' I shall know the winner." Ah, here was the Big Fight, saved for him, growing for him through these years and now released upon him! "I shall know the winner." He crouched lower beneath the storm, and in his inward storm buried his fingers in the sodden turf. "I shall know the winner" — ah, God, God, which was victory and which defeat? To win Dora, to take all that was his and she, his darling, with it, but against Rollo to use this hideous thing: was

that victory? To lose all, all, to let his darling go, but to spare Rollo: was victory there? Was that victory with such a prize? his Dora won? Yes, that was victory, victory! Was that victory at such a price, Rollo spared, his darling lost? Could he bear to see his darling go? Endure to live and know whose son he was? Watch Rollo with his darling and keep his secret sheathed? Was victory there? No, no, defeat — defeat unthinkable, impossible, not to be borne! He sprang to his feet and another thought came at him and gripped him. Japhra again: "Get at the littleness of it — get at the littleness of it. It will pass." Ah, easy, futile words; ah, damnable philosophy! Was littleness here? Was littleness in this? "Remember what endureth. Not man nor man's work — only the green things, only the brown earth that to-day humbly supports thee, to-morrow obscurely covers thee. Lay hold on that when aught vexeth thee; all else passeth."

The Big Fight had him; in its agony he cried aloud, threw up his arms and fell again to his knees.

II

So Ima found him.

When he had burst from the house, when Aunt Maggie had followed him and cried after him into the night, when she had returned and for a while wrestled with fear of what she had seen in his face, she went to the little room that was set apart for Ima and in sharp agony, in dreadful possession of that "Mistress, beware lest thou betrayest him," had cried "Ima, Ima, go to him! go to him!"

And Ima, taking Aunt Maggie's hands and staring in

her face, "What has happened to him? What has happened to him? I heard him in his room alone. I knew something had happened to him."

The other could only say: "Go to him, Ima! Go! He must not be alone!"

She was at once obeyed; her voice and face, and nameless dread that had been with Ima since Percival had left the cart and while she heard him in his room, commanded it.

"How will you find him?" Aunt Maggie asked.

Hatless and without covering against the storm, Ima went to the outer door. "He will be on Plowman's Ridge," she said. "I shall find him."

Some instinct took her along the very path that he had followed. Some fear put her to speed. Her heart that he had silenced on Bracken Down and that never again she had permitted him to see, carried her to him. She ran with her skirts taken in her left hand, gipsy again in her free and tireless action, gipsy when at the summit of the Ridge instinct directed her without hesitancy to the right, gipsy when in the blackness she almost ran upon him and a second time revealed him what he was to her.

He cried, "Ima! Why are you here?" but carried his surprise no further.

"Percival, what has come to thee?"

"O Ima, leave me alone! leave me alone!"

"Ah, let me help thee!"

He cried, "None can — none can help me! Leave me! leave me!" Almost he struck her with his frantic arms that pressed her from him. She nothing cared, but caught them:

"Ah, suffer me to help thee. Look how I have come to thee. I healed thee once."

Her voice, and memories of her touch when he had lain sick, acted upon him. "Hold my hands, then. I must hold something. Hold them, hold them! O Ima, I am suffering, suffering!"

"That is why I am come. Your hands burn in mine and tremble."

"Kind Ima!" he said brokenly. "Kind Ima!" and put her hands to his face.

She caught at her breath. There came a sudden lull in the storm as though the wind paused for words she tried to make.

"Some one is running to us," Percival cried, and took his hands from her; stepped where approaching feet sounded and suddenly caught one that ran into his arms.

"Who are you?" Then peered and then cried, "Hunt!"

The figure that he held panted for breath. "I'm going to him — me lord," Hunt said, and laughed with the words.

Percival went back a step and there came to Ima's ears his breathing, heavy as Hunt's that laboured from his run. "What do you mean?"

Again the laugh. "I heard, me lord. Like as I heard that odd bit in the hall at the Manor years back and never forgot it that day to this."

"How did you hear?"

"I come to you. I come to you hiding, knowing you'd be kind as was the only one ever kind to me. Hid in your bedroom back of the screen, you not being there. Saw you come in and heard —"

His sentence was broken in the savage hands with which Percival caught his collar and shook him. "What did you hear? What? What?"

"Leave off of me! You're choking of me."



"What did you hear?"

"Y're Lord Burdon. Not him — not that —"

He was swung from his feet by Percival's grasp. "What now? What now, Hunt?"

"Leave off of me! Leave off! You're killing me."

The grip relaxed, and Hunt shook himself free, and tossed his arms. "What now?" he echoed, and had hate and dreadful laughter in the scream his words made. "What now! I come out for him! For him and 'er as put me away and as I told her in the dock I'd come. Straight for 'em I come. Straight for 'em with the police after me. Stole this for 'em and come to give it 'em." He drew from his jacket what gleamed in his hand as he shook it aloft. "Come to shoot 'em like dogs as used me like dogs, the bloody tyrangs. I've got better for 'em now. They can go free — free! turned out! turned out! chucked into the street! kicked out! Think of 'em! Think of 'em crying and howling and beggars and laughed at and pointed at! That's what I'm going to give 'em. Into my hand God Almighty what casts down the oppressors and the tyrangs has delivered 'em! That's what — ar-r-r!"

Percival was on him and threw him. His throat was in Percival's clutch and his hands tearing at the hands that throttled him.

"You are not!" Percival cried. "You are not. By God, you shall not!"

In those wild words of Hunt's and what they meant — the world's mockery; in that vile face and what it stood for — the world's cruelty, clearly there came to him the answer that vainly in his torment he had sought. Rollo face this? Rollo to this be subjected? Rollo suffer ejection from home and name? Ah, now he knew which

in the big fight had been defeat and which was victory. "Rollo! Rollo! Rollo!" he had cried, and cried it as a curse. "Rollo! Rollo! Rollo!" now beat in his brain and in his grinding fingers and was pulse of the old protection throbbing for his friend that ever had been more than brother to him.

"Percival, you are killing him!" — Ima's fingers were on his, pulling his grip.

"Keep away! keep away!" he cried. "I'll have his life if need be!" and to Hunt, livid and at last gasp: "You damned devil! You damned devil! What are you going to promise me? How am I going to bind you? What am I going to do with you?"

There came gaspingly: "Promise — promise — oath to it."

He relaxed his fingers, and as Hunt drew gasping breaths, "You damned devil!" he cried again. "You damned fool. Did you not hear talk of proofs? Nothing in them! Nothing in them! Can you hear that?"

He was thrown on his side, he was grappled with by one whom fear of death gave strength, his clutch was eluded and Hunt sprang free.

"Nothing in them! What's your murder fingers for, then? Nothing in them — what you say 'Mother' for, then? Nothing in them — what — keep away! Keep off of me!" He whipped from his pocket what had gleamed in his hand. "Keep off of me! I'll fire. By God, I'll let you have it if you come at me!"

An' come at him, an' come at him, an' come at him, as of Percival in the fight the old men say.

Quick and straight as he had leapt at Pinsent, now quick and straight he leapt at Hunt. Quick and straight then to win victory, now quick and straight in victory

already gained. Quick and straight he leapt; quicker the pistol spoke; without reel or stumble he pitched to earth.

There came a scream of hideous sound from Hunt, and screaming still he turned and fled, screaming was answered by a shout, and screaming ran to the hold of tall men come out of the night in his pursuit and close, yet very late, before he screamed.

From Ima no cry nor sound. She cast herself beside the figure that lay there, looked in its face and had no need for word or question; pressed her lips to his and then cried only, "Little master! ah, ah, Percival!"

She threw herself full length upon him where full length he lay. With her body she shielded him from the immense rain, with her arms enfolded him, put her mouth to his.

So she lay scarcely breathing; so she held him — hers, her own.

There is a hill that stands in a chain of hills where the west country stands towards the sea. A river streams below in a great mouth that opens to sea and a wide flood that winds along the vale. No more than a wide ribbon it looks from the hill, and the sea no more than the sky's reflection. Here on a day the van stood, the horse tethered, and Japhra with his pipe watching the remote valley. He turned his eyes to Ima, knew the thoughts that had her, and touched her where she sat beside him on the steps. All was known to them in these days and he spoke of it. "My daughter, art thou still questioning it? Why, this was the happy ending such as none could make it. How had he endured to live and overthrow his friend? How live in silence and carry those hot embers in his breast? Nay, nay, the fight came to

him — that heart of ours — and he took up the prize. A fighter I marked him when a child he came to us. A fighter I knew him and a winner alway. Mark me what I told thee once when he lay with us: Though it be death, always victory. My daughter, what more happiness is there?"

THE END


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